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# The Development of William Butler Yeats: 1885-1900

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TO CARROLL AND VIRGIE.



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## Introduction

This monograph seeks to trace the pattern of development of a young man who was destined to become the finest English poet of the twentieth century. Its focus is a fifteen-year period, between 1885, when William Butler Yeats published his first poems in the *Dublin University Review*, and 1899, when he published *The Wind Among the Reeds*, for many readers "the high-water mark of Yeats' lyricism."<sup>1</sup>

The reader will find here little or nothing about Yeats's direction of the Abbey Theatre, or about his working relationship with John Millington Synge. The first decade of this century was an exhausting, and in many ways arid, period; poetic inspiration faltered; and Synge's death in 1909 came as a serious loss to Yeats. With events that came later—the Yeats-Pound symbiosis, the Irish Senatorship, the doctrine of *A Vision*, and the poetry of "the mature Yeats"—this study has nothing to do.

Why, then, concentrate on only fifteen years of Yeats's life?

Most critics agree that *The Wind Among the Reeds* marks the terminal point for one kind of lyricism, and by and large their attention has turned to the later poetry. Yeats's early work is, in general, not highly regarded. Thomas Parkinson once argued that Yeats achieved "limited triumphs" with his early style because it treated one aspect of human experience, the *anima mundi*, at the expense of a larger world, the one that would include all his mind "and all his experience." Years later, after Yeats had learned how "to reshape his poetic style to suit theatrical demands," he would treat the conflict between *anima hominis* and *anima mundi*.<sup>2</sup> "The Celtic Twilight" is described in most literary histories as a term that connotes indecision, rhetoric at the expense of truth, a flight from reality. The first fifteen years of Yeats's career, vivid though they may have been to Yeats himself, are dismissed as an apprenticeship. And Yeats, toward the end of his life, expressed the hope that younger writers would not begin as he had done, because nothing he did at that time had merit. When he re-read his early poems, those which had given him so much trouble, he found "little but romantic convention, unconscious drama," and he sighed, "It is so

many years before one can believe enough in what one feels even to know what the feeling is."<sup>3</sup>

When T. S. Eliot said that in the early books of Yeats he found only "in a line here or there, that sense of a unique personality which makes one sit up in excitement and eagerness to learn more about the author's mind and feelings,"<sup>4</sup> he was speaking from the perspective of a writer committed to the values of modern poetry: conciseness, tension, irony, the free play of wit, the stretching of poetical forms, the awareness of what science has contributed to civilization. Still, fashion reigns in poetry, as in the other arts. It is possible that an older way of writing poetry may appeal to a future generation,<sup>5</sup> and that the Celtic Twilight period of Yeats's life may become popular again. It is also likely that the charges made against this poetry of dream, emotional suggestiveness, and Irish myth will not seem quite so crushing in the years ahead.

We have here a genuine critical question: was Yeats's early work "a facade, deliberately set up and by no means representing him,"<sup>6</sup> or "a belated example of *amour courtois*, the platonic gallantry of old Provence and Trecento Italy and the various offshoots of that poetic conception of love,"<sup>7</sup> or a sincere and fairly direct expression of personality?

Much of what follows is a twice-told tale, but if the monograph contributes anything new, it does so by suggesting that the years between 1885 and 1899 should be looked at through Yeats's eyes. The letters, essays, polemical contributions, and hack-work written during these years give us a much fresher and truer understanding of what Yeats thought he was doing, of what he conceived his strategy of maturation to be, than any later autobiographical writings, many of which subtly distort and often "recreate" the conditions of Yeats's formative period.

I am attempting, therefore, to understand the conditions under which Yeats worked and to perceive them as he perceived them at the time. The landscape defined here is that seen by a younger Yeats, not by a "sixty-year-old smiling public man" (the phrase Yeats used to describe himself in "Among School Children"). To this end, all quota-

## INTRODUCTION

tions from Yeats's writings have been transcribed from the first editions of books, pamphlets, and periodicals, whenever possible. My research has benefited greatly from the O'Hegarty Collection of Yeats materials in the University of Kansas Library, and from the willingness of the Special Collections Staff, particularly Miss Alexandra Mason, to make those materials available. In terms of what is often said about the first half of Yeats's life, this evidence is worth reviewing.

Finally, I am grateful to A. Carroll Edwards, editor of *Modern Drama*, for permission to adapt, in Chapter VIII, an article on *The Countess Cathleen* that appeared in that journal in 1959.

## I: The Playlets

In his old age Yeats became an extraordinary figure, an Irish Timon "inspired by frenzy" to "shake the dead in their shrouds." His refusal to succumb to the sentimental complacencies of old age made him increasingly impressive to younger poets. "Now that my ladder's gone," he wrote in one of his last poems, "The Circus Animals' Desertion,"

I must lie down where all the ladders start,  
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

But from the very beginning Yeats was an unusual person, and much of his life has little or nothing to do with the modern world. He was born, after all, on June 13, 1865. His grandfather, the Reverend William Butler Yeats, was a skilled horseman who loved sports and dancing even after he became an evangelical rector of the Church of Ireland, the minority religion. His father, John Butler Yeats, turned into an apostate at Trinity College in the late 1850's, after he had read Butler's *Analogy*; he also found congenial the teachings of John Stuart Mill. Abandoning law in 1867, one year after he had been called to the bar, he became a painter of some skill, a non-conformist, and a stimulating, if unsettling, influence on his eldest son. Other influences from the distaff side, the poet's mother, Susan Pollexfen, included an abiding love of the Sligo countryside and of ghost stories.

It is not surprising that a succession of moves from Ireland to England to Ireland again, or Sligo alternating with Dublin, and the strong influences of several generations of Yeatses and Pollexfens helped to develop in the growing boy a complicated, introspective personality. Yeats never acquired a regular education. He refused to go to Trinity, the school of his grandfather and his father; indeed, he could not meet its entrance requirements. He briefly tried painting as a professional objective, registering at the Metropolitan School of Art, Dublin, and later at the Royal Hibernian Academy School. From 1880 he wrote poems and stories, and his distant cousin Laura Armstrong called him "the Poet," but not until 1885 did he decide he wanted most to become a professional writer; we can look more closely at his career from this point on.

Katharine Tynan in later years called him "the onlie begetter" of the new Irish poetry. In the spring of 1885, when Charles Hubert Oldham introduced her to him, Yeats was twenty years old, "all dreams and all gentleness," and his "combative tendencies" came later.<sup>1</sup> Yeats had been reading with attention and approval Oldham's earnest publication, the *Dublin University Review*, which sought from the first issue onward (February, 1885) to provide "some outlet for the intellectual activity of its students and graduates, which would at the same time help to direct and develop the educated opinion of Dublin, and indeed, we may say, of all Ireland." And it was to this periodical that Yeats submitted not only his first-published poems, "Song of the Faeries" and "Voices," but a remarkable set of playlets, "Mosada," "The Island of Statues," and "The Seeker."

Although Charles Johnston, son of the Orange leader and a young man whom Yeats admired, praised them highly, perhaps even extravagantly,<sup>2</sup> Yeats wrote them as exercises. "Mosada" dealt with Inquisition Spain, about which Yeats knew little and may have cared less. It began with a dialogue between Mosada, a young Moorish girl in the village of Azubia who had been accused by the Inquisition of practicing magic, and Cola, a lame beggar who, terrified by the threats of Inquisition officials, had betrayed her. "They say I am all ugliness," Cola said, attempting to excuse his perfidy:

...lame-footed

I am; one shoulder turned awry—why then  
Should I be good?

Cola's character was complicated by his jealousy of Mosada's beauty, fear of her ability to conjure "phantoms" and visions, and anxiety for forgiveness; he even offered to go in her place; but Mosada willingly awaited her destiny, and, understanding his mixture of motives, forgave his treachery.

The holy man who had promised to burn "heresy from this mad earth," and who had rejected the pleas for mercy from two monks, condemned Mosada to death, but Mosada, taking poison from a ring, became more than a nameless, faceless necromancer: she turned out to be his lost love.

Be not so pale, dear love.  
 Oh! can my kisses bring a flush no more  
 Upon thy face. How heavily thy head  
 Hangs on my breast. Listen, we shall be safe.  
 We'll fly from this before the morning star.  
 Dear heart, there is a secret way that leads  
 Its paven length towards the river's marge,  
 Where lies a shallop in the yellow reeds.  
 Awake, awake, and we will sail afar,  
 Afar along the fleet white river's face—  
 Alone with our own whispers and replies—  
 Alone among the murmurs of the dawn.

But despite his willingness to renounce the faith, the holy man watched Mosada die in his arms. He then returned to his religion, and promised to importune the souls of other prisoners to penitence.

The priest, beneath his harsh mask, had been a tormented and unhappy lover. Mosada's interest in magic was not treated by the poet as evil, and her innocence remained unstained even by Cola's betrayal. For her, and at this stage in Yeats's career, the language of Shelley seemed most appropriate: a "morning star," "a shallop in the yellow reeds," "a secret way." The subject-matter of the play was the cold substitute that religious certainty offered in place of spiritual beauty. "Mosada" dealt, however tentatively in borrowed language and undramatic fashion, with a theme that Yeats would find obsessive in later years.

"The Island of Statues," an Arcadian fairy tale, also showed the influence of Shelley, as well as of Keats.<sup>3</sup> No brief synopsis can do justice to this remarkably crowded series of events and cast of characters, and Yeats may well have been too ambitious in seeking to work out a personal religious credo through this kind of extended metaphor. "I am very religious," he wrote many years later, in *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), "and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their

first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters, with some help from philosophers and theologians." "The Island of Statues" is notable, however, for the cheerless and unattractive image of Arcadia that Yeats presented. In a world of quarrels, sadness, and cowardice, "Joy's brother, Fear, dwells ever in each breast." Any knight who might want to slay the dragon or an "enchanter old" had to leave behind him the "poor race of leafy Arcady."

Naschina, the Arcadian shepherdess, finally overthrew the Enchantress of the Island of Statues in the major event of the play. She did so by displaying St. Joseph's image on her necklace to the goblin Queen, who thereupon vanished. Christ, in other words, had won still another victory over the powers of the pagan world. Moreover, it was true that Naschina could laugh, and that the Enchantress, before her defeat, envied her this ability; the Enchantress had even promised her, in exchange for this gift of a mortal, the right to an eternal peace.

Nevertheless, Yeats showed that a Christian victory might bring ambiguous blessings. Naschina "rescued" the sleepers whom the Enchantress had put under a spell, and as they reluctantly awoke, they spoke of their memories of Aeneas, who had left for the shores of Carthage; Arthur ruling from Uther's chair; the god Pan playing "an oaten pipe unto a listening fawn, / Whose insolent eyes unused to tears would weep"; and the years of "Troia" and "the Achaians' tented chiefs at bay." They did not want to return to Arcadia, "the real world," Naschina's world; they preferred to remain on their Island; and finally they elected as their new Queen Naschina herself. She did not protest. The last lines describe the shadows of the Sleepers being cast "far across the grass," and Naschina "standing, shadowless," unable (or unwilling) to leave behind "this lake-nurtured isle." Here grew the "goblin flower of joy"; here sang a voice in "sad faery tones."<sup>4</sup>

"The Seeker," like "The Island of Statues" cast in the form of a "dramatic poem," consisted of two scenes. In the first, three shepherds, peacefully watching a wood-fire "in a woodland valley," were startled by the entry of an Old Knight. He had been lost

Where spice-isles nestle on the star-trod seas,  
And where the polar winds and waters wrestle



In endless dark, and by the weedy marge  
Of Asian rivers, rolling on in light.

But now he had come to the wood where lay "the long-lost forest of the sprite," and, despite the efforts of the shepherds to dissuade him from entering that wood, he went forward with his eyes "a-glitter" to his final rendezvous. In the second scene, after having searched through "miseries unhuman" for "threescore years of dream-led wandering," he finally arrived at a ruined palace in the forest. He remembered that a voice had called him forth "from 'mid the dance" at his father's house, and had spoken words like "banded adders in his breast." He became a coward in the field, yet he did not object, knowing that he had been singled out for a special destiny, that his ultimate goal was "joys unhuman." He demanded a glimpse of the face of the spirit that had made him travail. "A sudden light" burst over a motionless Figure standing near the palace, and the weary, aged Knight realized that he had been pursuing Infamy,

A bearded witch, her sluggish head low bent  
On her broad breast. . . .

When he refused to believe that hers was indeed the magical, sweet voice that had led him on, she raised a mirror before him to reflect his face and form. His final words, cried before death overtook him, were "Again, the voice! the voice!" His dream had destroyed him. Yeats, in the briefest possible compass, had managed to suggest that the melancholy knight, moving inevitably toward his death, had willingly renounced and suffered all, even the loss of his reputation as a warrior, for the sake of a love that ever retreated before him.

"Time and the Witch Vivien," printed first in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889), also dealt with the confrontation toward which all dreamers move. Vivien took pride in her beauty—she loved "the little golden greedy carp" whose gold reflected her gold—and her "spells and secret rites." Above all, she wanted to test her wits against "some fierce magician." When Time appeared, she taunted him as "the wrinkled squanderer of human wealth," refused to buy his wares, and gambled insouciantly with him for stakes that became in-

creasingly valuable. But Time was bound to win: not because he played with loaded dice, or because luck favored him, but because he was fated to win, and always would. Vivien, even as she gambled, recognized how overwhelming were the odds against her:

Thus play we first with pawns, poor things and weak;  
And then the great ones come, and last the king.  
So men in life and I in magic play;  
First dreams, and goblins, and the lesser sprites,  
And now with Father Time I'm face to face.

Time warned Vivien that defeat would mean death; but for her life would lose its savor if she avoided her final gamble. It did no good to lay the hour-glass on its side; Time would right it. She was surprised only that Time's reckoning came so soon: "Already?"

There were other dramatized lyrics: "From the Book of Kauri, the Indian. Section V., On the Nature of God," "Ephemera," "Jealousy" (which Yeats later called the first scene of an unfinished play "about a man loved by two women, who had the one soul between them," which the sight of "a man at Rosses Point carrying two salmon" had inspired him to write), and a number of others that Yeats thought unworthy of printing. The playlets were not sufficiently extended to permit adequate characterization, and the iteration of ideas sometimes stifled dramatic possibilities. But ultimately the conflict between the world of dreams and the monotonously triumphant world of Time, "an old pedlar, with a scythe, an hour-glass, and a black bag," the world of Arcadia, must be recognized as a war raging within Yeats's own sensibility, a lover's quarrel not with the world but within himself. It was hard for him to understand why the certainties of history, religion, and science should inevitably triumph over the "cloud and foam" of a poet's imagination.

Lest we judge harshly a dramatic poetry which cannot hold for long a reader's attention, we should recall how quickly Yeats moved away from it. As early as 1888 he wrote to Katharine Tynan that he was dissatisfied: "Since I have left the 'Island,' I have been going about on shoreless seas. Nothing anywhere has clear outline."<sup>5</sup> He included very little of it in editions after 1890.

Nevertheless, it was a useful beginning. His father, who admired dramatic poetry above all other kinds, thought well of "Mosada," as did the editor of the *Irish Monthly*, Father Matthew Russell; Gerard Manley Hopkins, who received a copy personally from John Butler Yeats, read it with some interest. As for "The Island of Statues," Thomas William Rolleston, one of John O'Leary's disciples, a man whose opinions Yeats respected, and later a co-founder of the Rhymers' Club, preferred it to *The Wanderings of Oisín*. Maud Gonne, when she first met Yeats, confessed that she had wept over it. And Henley was "most enthusiastic." The playlets prefigured later explorations of the possibility that the soul has dual allegiances. Most important, they established Yeats's right to be heard.

## II: Becoming Irish

It is understandable that Yeats, in middle age, should have called "Mosada" a "bad early play," and shuddered at the recollection of his Indian poems. But the merits of the alternatives open to him were not easily judged, and the late 1880's formed a genuine transitional period. On the one hand (at the age of seventeen), the impassioned rhetoric of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, Byron's *Manfred*; his father's influence at its height; a delight in the magic of *The Odyssey*. On the other, a developing malaise, doubts about his father's religious skepticism, some curious readings in mystical philosophy, tentative debating stances in Oldham's discussion group (called the Contemporary Club), and growing admiration of John O'Leary's idealistic nationalism. Yeats even tried to write like a Young Ireland poet, though he sensed the basic mediocrity of much that Ferguson, Mangan, and Davis had written; he admired their "gusty energy" and the fact that they had acquired a popular audience. Yeats, who was to manufacture heroes all his life, found one ready-made in O'Leary, who presided triumphantly over the meetings of the Young Ireland Society in Dublin that Yeats attended.

The shift from an unfocused Shelleyan and Pre-Raphaelite style with Indian subject-matter to an idiom distinctively his own, based firmly on Irish themes, took almost a full decade, and was surely not complete when *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* appeared in January, 1889. Too much in that volume reveals the fascination which sentimentality, even bathos, and elements of parody exerted over his imagination. Uncertain of his audience, he had not yet defined his subject-matter. When he wrote to Katharine Tynan (April 11, 1888), debating what to include or exclude from the volume, he worried that "The Seeker" and "How Ferencz Renyi Kept Silent. Hungary, 1848" might have to be thrown overboard: "The Irish poems must all be kept, making the personality of the book—or as few thrown over as may be."<sup>1</sup> But he rejected neither poem. For years he found himself unable to part with the poems he had been inspired to write because of Elizabethan literature, and which had locales that might be as easily Anywhere as a German forest or a crater in the moon. Not until 1908, with

Bullen's edition of his collected works, did he finally, reluctantly, stop reprinting them.

The historical foundation for the episode recounted in "Ferencz Renyi" has almost disappeared from view, but the poem is fairly characteristic of Yeats's early interests. In this poem a school master, a dreamer-fiddler, refuses to reveal to an Austrian general the hiding-place of Hungarian patriot-rebels. His mother and sister, who urge him to speak, are threatened with death before a firing-squad. His beloved curses him for letting her die. When the fatal shot is fired, Renyi runs forward, "rolling from his lips a madman's laugh." This inchoate world of emotions, of splendid final gestures, of directionless energy, will hold a reader's attention without engaging his intellect. It is a poetry in which the "hearts of Erin" are ever fresh-stirred," steeds are "proud-bounding," the evening descends "hideous, and warning," and the Irish Hurrah "sweeps o'er the mountain when hounds are on scent."

In "The Phantom Ship" the hexameters of *Evangeline* are employed to narrate the legend of a ship that sails under full canvas. Its crew are "all the drowned that ever were drowned from that village by the sea." On the faces of the drowned are joys and fears "that the live earth knoweth not." At the behest of a priest who asks for supplications to God to console the tormented spirits in purgatory, the villagers pray until the dawn comes up over "the slow heaving ocean—mumbling mother of the dead."

Or again, when Yeats plays with the notion that a drowned city lies under the waters of Lough Gill ("A Legend"), God becomes a melancholy eavesdropper beneath a market cross. A grey professor ridicules religion as he passes by. The mayor, hearing talk of the poor, is appalled by communistic ideas. A bishop abuses those whose view of God differs from his. God, in His turn, weeps a tear which falls on the city, and the city becomes a lake.

The broad-brush technique of such poems works in a realm almost beyond criticism. The writings of Jeremiah John Callanan, which Yeats studied diligently, resist serious analysis. Yeats used for this kind of poetry (and he wrote a good deal of it) a vocabulary that found its sanction in other poems rather than in the life it purported to describe.

When he described the illumination of the East ("Kanva on Himself"), the literary language went soft:

Now wherefore hast thou tears innumeros?  
 Hast thou not known all sorrow and delight  
 Wandering of yore in forests rumorous,  
 Beneath the flaming eyeballs of the night. . . .

A man can only "quaff" wine. Death "cometh with the next life-key." Gnostic sayings are drawn from Brahman teaching, Greek philosophy, Celtic mythology. Some of the effect are ponderously, perhaps unintentionally, humorous. Male fairies lightly foot it in "A Lover's Quarrel Among the Fairies," and tease the owls "puffed like puff-balls on a tree," while names like Cranberry Fruit, Coltsfoot, and Mousetail adorn this home-grown other-world.

It was a sign of health, as Yeats noted, that somebody liked almost every poem in the book better than the rest. But of all the poems, *The Wanderings of Oisín* was not only longer, consumed more time in the writing ("It was the greatest effort of all my things"), and demanded more in the way of solitude and concentration, but its failures were more illuminating to Yeats's concept of how a poet grew, and its successes were more exhilarating, than those of all his other poems combined.

When I had finished it I brought it round to read to my Uncle George Pollexfen and could hardly read, so collapsed I was. My voice quite broken. It really was a kind of vision. It beset me day and night. Not that I ever wrote more than a few lines in a day. But those few lines took me hours. All the rest of the time I walked about the roads thinking of it. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Yeats knew that all had not been done well, that perhaps only shadows had been transcribed on paper. "It is not inspiration that exhausts one, but art."

A reviewer for the *Spectator* (July 27, 1889) wondered about the sources of the poem, eliciting from Yeats the strong denial that much had been borrowed from anyone else. Yeats insisted that the materials dealing with the three islands were wholly his own, even if the Irish

peasants talked about *Tir-u-an-oge* (the Country of the Young) as consisting of three phantom islands. But he did admit to relationships between the first few pages of *Oisín* and "a most beautiful old poem written by one of the numerous half-forgotten Gaelic poets who lived in Ireland in the last century."<sup>3</sup> This source—never identified by Yeats in any of his later editions—has been discussed in an illuminating source-study by Russell W. Alspach as Michael Comyn's "The Lay of Oisín on the Land of Youth." Yeats, like most of his compatriots in a Young Ireland Society, was ignorant of Gaelic, and borrowed what he needed from one of two translations: that of the Ossianic Society, or that of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language.<sup>4</sup> He was also indebted to the middle Irish dialogues of St. Patrick and Oisín, available in the *Transactions of the Ossianic Society* (Vols. I, III, and IV), and may have borrowed other materials from Kickham's "Knocknagow," the poetry of Ferguson, a modern-verse retelling of St. Brendan's voyage (in the *Dublin University Magazine* for January, 1848), Robert Joyce's *Deirdre*, various Irish tales about sleeping heroes (for the Island of Sleepers episode), and legends that Standish O'Grady had translated and published for the Ossianic Society, as well as for his *History of Ireland*. But the final product was Yeats's own, and Alspach's record of direct borrowings does not substantiate a charge of plagiarism.

The frame, so conveniently at hand in the Patrick-Oisín dialogues reclaimed from medieval literature, is not the least of the poem's assets. Patrick is a Christian saint arrogant in the surety of his faith. When he condescendingly asks Oisín to tell him the "famous story" of the warrior's "bad old days," he has no patience with his antagonist's "brooding memory." What Oisín calls Patrick's "craft" (Oisín will not dignify Christianity with a nobler epithet) has killed the old Fenian songs, and Patrick foresees a coming darkness: "God shakes the world with restless hands." He rejoices that the Fenians are in hell, being whipped by the demons, and he is convinced that Oisín must wear the flagstones with his knees to repent for a lost soul. The Fenians and their gods—as Oisín has discovered on his return to the world he left behind—have died and left behind them "a small and a feeble populace stooping with

mattock and spade. . . .” Patrick’s shrines are “bell-mounted churches” of wattles and wood-work, and in Patrick’s heart there is no charity for the sinner.

Against this cold hatred Oisín returns a nobler passion. He is the “flaming lion of the world,” unrepentant at the end, determined to rouse the Fenians with ancient war-chants and to “tear out the red flaming stones.” He knows full well that he has outlived “the swift innumerable spears” of his younger comrades; but his final request is for Patrick to lend him a staff; he will act, not weep. Full of gusto that makes his every act surprising (he cannot anticipate the future), he astonishes the singers of the Island of the Living with his song of human joys, improvised on a borrowed silver harp; meets in titanic combat Manannan, the sea-god of the Island of Victories; and blows one last rebellious note on Niam’s horn before lying down to sleep on the Island of Forgetfulness.

So lived I and loved not, so wrought I and wrought not, with  
creatures of dreams,

In a long iron sleep, as a fish in the water goes dumb as a stone.

One critic has drawn an unfavorable comparison between the second part and Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*: “Indeed, the least convincing part of the poem seems to me to be the fighting on the Island of Victories, which was his own invention.”<sup>5</sup> But this is the old test of reality applied to a poem literary in inspiration, romantic in tone, and obscurely symbolic in every significant detail,<sup>6</sup> and it is absurd to demand in the second part “clearly drawn pictures of hard hitting and accurately directed thrusts.” The “dusk demon, dry as a withered sedge,” who is engrossed by his sad thoughts, and who sings “bacchant and mournful” to himself, is a sea-god able to assume “forms without number.” He represents, for Oisín, a series of tests in a world where warring alternates with feasting, and where no victory is ever final.

The importance of *The Wanderings of Oisín* lies in its marking of a definite stage in Yeats’s apprenticeship, and three matters—two pertaining to the poem, the third to the volume as a whole—may be briefly commented on. First, Yeats was now turning to the scholars for his texts: his versifyings of such elements in his sources as the hunt of the



Fianna, Niam's eyes, Oisín's admiration of Niam's beauty, and "the phantoms dread" who accompany Oisín and Niam on their way, although neither in number nor importance sufficient to justify a charge of direct translation, have a curious flavor of the lamp. The playlets, slighter in their intention and achievement, had been far less directly committed to specific literary works. But now Yeats had begun to survey a cultural tradition, and to examine literary materials that only recently had been modernized by Gaelic scholars. His footnotes and references to the editions of Irish literature that he quarried during this period—in *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* (1888), or *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888)—display the erudition of the self-educated, but are no less impressive for all that. Yeats even sought to arbitrate quarrels between scholars.

Second, Yeats was becoming concerned with the problems of literary structure on a more extended scale than anything thus far undertaken: he was using the Oisín-Patrick dialogue as a frame for his narrative, and this multiplied the resonances of Oisín's encounters with those who drank the god-brewed wine and sang the old songs in a world ignorant of Patrick's religion. Yeats was also ordering the sequence of the islands (there seems no reason to deny Yeats his originality on this point; the various versions of elysium which Alspach cites are analogues rather than sources). Oisín begins his adventures by believing, along with the dancers of Part I, that

Everything that's sad is wicked—  
 Everythings that fears to-morrow  
 Or the wild grey osprey sorrow.

Yet there is a tomorrow, and Oisín's experiences on the Island of Victories are, after all, efforts to ward off, or defeat, an enemy who "with age is subtle-souled," in order to rescue a beautiful maiden "with chain sea-rotted, round her middle tied." So long as Oisín delights in his strength these conflicts continue; but ultimately his pride of manhood diminishes as his recognition of their pointlessness grows.

Light is man's love and lighter is man's rage—  
 His purpose drifts away.

Niam cannot enlighten Oisín in his quest for the Isle of Youth; she weeps at her inability to answer his questions about its location. Oisín's odyssey is ultimately leading to a knowledge of "how men pass," of death; and his final gesture—the flinging of a sack full of sand some five yards while "leaning down from the gem-studded saddle" of his horse—is the bravura of a man who has lived intensely, fully, and heroically, and who even at the end denies the fact of his mortality. The resemblances between Oisín and the Ulysses-figure who so challenged the imaginations of Dante and Tennyson, the wanderer who insisted that there was something more to see and do, are striking; but, as in the playlets, Oisín—"that savage greybeard," as Yeats called him—has been moving toward his realization through a pattern of ordered events.

Third, it was the chief poem of a book whose publication led to reviews, recognition, and some applause. The letters illustrate how eagerly Yeats read his notices, and, more to the point, how he began to discriminate among them. What begins with delight that his name should be in print at all, whether the review be good or unfavorable, continues with annoyance about small points,<sup>7</sup> rapidly becomes defiant,<sup>8</sup> turns into a strong desire to avoid other literary people<sup>9</sup> who are not, after all, "the world," and finally becomes the pride of a scrapbook collector ("22 [reviews] thus far"). Yeats had reason for pride. Henley's review in the *Scots Observer* he considered "splendid," William Morris thought well of *Oisín* ("You write my sort of poetry," he told Yeats, and would have said more if outrage at the sight of "a new ornamental cast-iron lamp-post" had not interrupted his line of thought), Ernest Rhys used it as the occasion for a consideration of the new Celtic poetry that seemed to be focusing as a movement, and Oscar Wilde reviewed the book for both *Woman's World* (March, 1889) and the *Pall Mall Gazette* (July 12, 1889). D. J. O'Donoghue (later the Librarian of University College, Dublin) read a paper on *Oisín* at the Southwark Literary Club; the editor of *Leisure Hour*, rejoicing that "every line, almost every word is alive," decided to buy an article from Yeats because of his pleasure with *Oisín*; and the patronizing or wretched reviews were definitely in the minority. Yeats's extravagant

pride in the possibility of his creating "some new *Prometheus Unbound*" through the use of "Patrick or Columbkil, Oisín or Fion," and unifying all the races of Ireland "from a mythology, that marries them to rock and hill,"<sup>10</sup> was recorded many years later, and developed as a consequence of this reception.

### III: Newspaper Correspondent

Much of what Yeats published during these years might be summarized as a kind of superior journalism, neither uncommon for an age when great editors accommodated the talents of diverse artists and entertainers, nor remarkable for its originality. But the publication of *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* was a notable moment in the process whereby Yeats, by repudiating the cosmopolitan tastes of Professor Dowden of Trinity College, was establishing Celticism as his proper subject-matter. It also established him as "one of the rising poets."

Despite the opinion of his father, who thought that regular work would soon degenerate into routine, Yeats wanted to secure "peace of mind" by undertaking a series of articles on subject-matter of direct interest to himself. The opportunity was soon provided by, of all publications, the *Providence Journal* in the United States. Yeats was vague in later years as to how the connection had begun. It is likely, however, that Alfred Williams of Providence, impressed by "Mosada" as promising work, took the occasion of a visit to Mrs. Banim, widow of the Irish novelist, to extend an offer to a would-be feature-writer. As for the *Boston Pilot*, the newspaper to which Yeats sent a second series of articles: the editor, John Boyle O'Reilly, had been imprisoned and exiled, like O'Leary, and was a dedicated Fenian. In these two periodicals, Yeats recorded the shift in his taste for subject-matter, from the publication of "How Ferencz Renyi Kept Silent" in *The Pilot* (August 6, 1887) to the printing of his last item, a letter from Dublin, also in *The Pilot*, on November 19, 1892.

These contributions have been gathered in *Letters to the New Island* and introduced by Horace Reynolds (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1934). Reynolds corresponded with Yeats about the circumstances of their original appearance. Yeats, writing more than forty years later (August 1, 1933), evaluated them from his later wisdom, and confessed, for example, that he had overrated the poetical importance of John Todhunter; but his most interesting statement spoke of the passions of his youth. "Burning with adoration and hatred I wrote verse that expressed emotions common to every sentimental boy and girl, and

that may be the reason why the poems upon which my popularity had depended until a few years ago were written before I was twenty-seven."<sup>1</sup>

Much of that emotional intensity spilled over into his "letters," which are eminently readable today, long after the causes espoused have been won or forgotten. This was the young Yeats who distrusted the men his own age grinding away at their books in the Dublin National Library; who fought his own tendency to "generalize"; who patronized the English dramatists as played out ("... most of the best dramas on the English stage from the times of Congreve and Sheridan and Goldsmith to our own day have been the work of Irishmen"); and who denied T. W. Rolleston the right to have interests in Walt Whitman, Lessing, and Epictetus ("Cosmopolitan literature is, at best, but a poor bubble, though a big one"). He entertained assorted interests of his own, such as occultism. But his one note, struck time and time again, was the richness of Irish subject-matter.

To a woman who had published two books of prose sketches he urged a visit to Ireland, to see what she might discover there worth writing about. "After all," he wrote (in the same year as the publication of *Oisín*), "Ireland is the true subject for the Irish."<sup>2</sup> His praise of Douglas Hyde was unstinted, and he recognized the merit of Hyde's translations as early as any member of his generation. "He is surely the most imaginative of all Irish scholars,"<sup>3</sup> he declared (his own anthologies of Irish legends not many months away); in an article on the poems of Ellen O'Leary, sister to the Irish patriot Yeats never ceased to admire, he praised Hyde's literary culture as a rare combination of knowledge and imagination;<sup>4</sup> and he noted with approval that the Irish National Literary Society, which was to have a tumultuous history, turned immediately to Hyde, as well as O'Leary, Katharine Tynan, and Maud Gonne, for early guidance. Yeats's sense of historical development was always imaginative and intuitive rather than disciplined; but he knew, in the late 1880's, that a major shift of emphasis had taken place in studies of Irish folk-lore. Where once "fables and fairy tales" had been taken as "a haystack of dead follies, wherein the virtuous might find one little needle of historical truth," now such scholars as

Joubainville and Rhys "and many more" had revealed in them "old beautiful mythologies wherein ancient man said symbolically all he knew about God and man's soul. . . ." <sup>5</sup> As a consequence, an Irish writer might now study, at no loss to his immortal soul (but, Yeats implied, with some loss to journalism, politics, and "cosmopolitanism"), "the most imaginative of all our periods . . . the heroic age and the few centuries that followed it and preceded the Norman invasion. . . ." <sup>6</sup> He burned with adoration and hatred: "Whenever an Irish writer had strayed away from Irish themes and Irish feeling," he wrote, "in almost all cases he had done no more than make alms for oblivion." <sup>7</sup> He narrowed his vision deliberately to Irish literature, to Irish thought alone, <sup>8</sup> and, in the process of narrowing, berated those who had sought wider audiences or less restricted subject-matter. Most nineteenth-century Irish writing had been dismally non-national. Non-nationalism "gave to Lever and Lover their shallowness, and still gives to a section of Dublin society its cynicism. Lever and Lover and Allingham alike, it has deprived of their true audience. Many much less endowed writers than they have more influence in Ireland. Political doctrine was not demanded of them, merely nationalism. They would not take the people seriously—these writers of the Ascendancy—and had to go to England for their audience. To Lever and Lover Ireland became merely a property shop, and to Allingham a half serious memory." <sup>9</sup> He even attacked with impatience the publication in the *Irish Monthly* of an article about the German Kaiser. Such subjects were fit only for English periodicals. "An Irish magazine should give us Irish subjects." (Yeats must have seen some of this rhetoric as a counterpart to Maud Gonne's rousing oratory in France and Holland, and probably hungered for the "wild enthusiasm" which was greeting her speeches on the Continent.) "Have we no Irish sins to denounce, no Irish virtues to encourage, no Irish legends to record, no Irish stories to tell, that we must sing the praises of the Emperor of Germany and Mr. Stead, both of them gentlemen who have no need of a trumpeter?" <sup>10</sup> Basically Yeats's concern was not with scholarship, with admiring the past for what it had accomplished, but with the possible uses of the past, with the chance to exploit the literature certified by Victorian scholars as

genuine, and to channel it in a patriotic direction. In reviewing John Todhunter's adaptations of "The Children of Lir and Sons of Turann," which struck him as the kind of effort more Irish writers should be making, he announced that here was no end of subject-matter. "... for the literature of Ireland is still young, and on all sides of this road is Celtic tradition and Celtic passion crying for singers to give them voice. England is old and her poets must scrape up the crumbs of an almost finished banquet, but Ireland has still full tables."<sup>11</sup> The great literature of her past will supply "the imaginative and spiritual food" she needs for the future.<sup>12</sup>

If Yeats exaggerated the malice of the enemy (the work of scholars such as Hyde would have made its way if Yeats had never written for transatlantic periodicals, and was—in fact—regarded with warm sympathy by both Irish and English critics), he did so because of the exhilaration of belonging to a cause, one to which passionate young men might belong, one which he had found for himself. Moreover, he was committing himself to it before he had damaged his sensibility with laments for a lost Philistinism, for "the common pleasures of common men," which had already ruined several over-cultivated poet-aesthetes of the 1890's.<sup>13</sup>

## IV: Anthologist

Newspaper essays, reviews, and thinly disguised editorials were not enough, if only because their brevity prevented Yeats from developing any idea to its full dimensions. Between the late 1880's and 1895 Yeats established for himself still another channel of communication with the public that would listen to him if he had something valid to say. What he wanted to say he was discovering (almost as if he were eavesdropping on himself) in the small anthologies which he copied, freely re-wrote, and edited during this period. The number of such volumes was high, averaging one a year: *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* (1888), *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), which appeared in various editions during the next decade, both in England and America; *Stories from Carleton* (1889), dedicated to Katharine Tynan; *Representative Irish Tales* (1891); both an English and an American edition of *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892); Yeats's collection of materials wholly his own, *The Celtic Twilight: Men and Women, Dhoul's and Faeries* (1893); and *A Book of Irish Verse* (1895), dedicated "To the Members of the National Literary Society of Dublin and the Irish Literary Society of London." The texts for still another volume, on Irish adventures, were assembled (1890) for Fisher Unwin's Adventure Series, but publication plans fell through. Compiling any one of these books was a time-consuming, ill-paid process, contributing to the deterioration of Yeats's eyesight and general health; but in the half-dozen years he required to build his basic library of "literary materials," Yeats moved closer to a sympathetic identification with, and belief in, the fairies and ghosts he was describing. He began by refusing to rationalize them; he ended by accepting their existence; nor will it help modern readers of Yeats to imagine that somehow he suspended disbelief for the sake of a sophisticated strategy of getting into print such stories as an anecdote about "good Father John O'Hart" or a "solemn-eyed" stolen child.

The scholarship behind these volumes was eclectic and wide-ranging. Yeats acquainted himself with all the standard Victorian works and read as many as possible of the more obscure chap-books which might be found "brown with turf smoke on cottage shelves, and



are, or were, sold on every hand by the pedlars, but cannot be found in any library of this city of the Sassanach." He borrowed from *Belgravia*, *All the Year Round*, and *Monthly Packet*, as well as from unpublished stories recorded by Douglas Hyde. He read, in addition, an extraordinary number of books on general subjects for the sake of the "stray folk-lore" that he might extract from them; on the recommendation of Sir William Wilde, the *Dublin and London Magazine* for 1825-1828; the *Folk-Lore Journal* and the *Folk-Lore Record*; the publications of the Ossianic Society; the proceedings of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society; as well as a number of old Irish magazines. Nor should one underestimate the amount of original research that Yeats conducted among the Irish peasants in order, for example, to gather the sayings of Father John O'Hart, that extraordinary priest of the Eighteenth Century.<sup>1</sup>

Because Yeats so often came at the same problem from only slightly varying directions, the major articles of his developing faith may best be identified by our looking more closely at three volumes: *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, and *The Celtic Twilight*. Yeats dedicated the first volume to John O'Leary and the Young Ireland Societies. The dedicatory poem by T. W. Rolleston made clear why O'Leary was so venerated by younger men: O'Leary had suffered for the cause, had talked and spoken

to serve the Law above the laws  
That purifies the hearts of men. . . .

When O'Leary failed, he did not become "sullen" or "disconsolate." The poems that Yeats included in the anthology—a slim volume of some eighty pages—were by Katharine Tynan, T. W. Rolleston, Charles Gregory Fagan, An Chraoibhin Aoibhinn, Rose Kavanagh, Ellen O'Leary, John Todhunter, and Frederick J. Gregg. Yeats contributed "The Stolen Child," "King Goll," and "The Meditation of the Old Fisherman," as well as a love song adapted from the Gaelic (never reprinted). These poems had

little chance to live  
With those that Davis' clarion blew,

but they were offered to O'Leary as the best the poets had to give. O'Leary, in fact, may have been more responsible for the final selections than Yeats. Decades later, Yeats recognized how great a debt he owed O'Leary. He especially appreciated the lesson that a poet need not overvalue any man simply because he shared his opinions: "and when he [O'Leary] lent me the poems of Davis and the Young Irishers, of whom I had known nothing, he did not, although the poems of Davis had made him a patriot, claim that they were very good poetry."<sup>2</sup> The lesson served Yeats well in the years of polemics that lay ahead.

*Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, as Yeats clearly indicated, was a collection of stories by both well-known and anonymous authors. In it Yeats established, with the precision of a Buffon, important categories: "the trooping fairies"; changelings; the female merrows whose appearance foretold the coming of gales; the solitary fairies; ghosts; witches and fairy doctors; the legends of T'Yeer-na-n-Oge (or Tir-na-n-Og, the Country of the Young, into which age and death had not been able to penetrate); and stories about saints, priests, the devil, giants, kings, queens, princesses, earls, and robbers. Within these categories, what George Russell copied for Yeats at the Dublin Library, or what Yeats contributed on his own,<sup>3</sup> or what came in the way of translations by Douglas Hyde or briskly told anecdotes by such Irish yarn-spinners as William Carleton, Lady Wilde, Patrick Kennedy, and T. Crofton Croker, united in remarkable fashion to illustrate one man's taste.

The notes, to which Yeats devoted enormous effort, exhibit some satisfaction that the English fairies had disappeared by King James's reign, while the Irish fairies stayed on to give gifts to the kindly and to plague the surly. It was difficult even for the "children of light" to deny the existence of phantoms while waiting in a cemetery at midnight, "for every one is a visionary, if you scratch him deep enough. But the Celt is a visionary without scratching." Strangers, as Yeats warned his readers, would have difficulty in getting the Irish to speak of the fairies; patience, the cultivation of friendships, the willingness to believe, were indispensable prerequisites. It is in this volume that Yeats

first introduced Paddy Flynn, the story-teller of Ballisodare, that most fairy-haunted village of Sligo, who was to reappear as the source of many of the most charming legends in *The Celtic Twilight*.

For Yeats these stories had the appeal of art. They were, as he put it, "full of simplicity and musical occurrences," and they grew out of the consciousness, common to Arabs and Chinese alike, that the relatively few matters which were constant through the ages—birth, love, pain, and death—could provoke deeper speculation about the meaning of symbols than the clustering facts of the machine, "which is prose and a *parvenu*." Indeed, this was the call of the past rising more strongly than the metronome-beat of the present. "The various collectors of Irish folk-lore have, from our point of view, one great merit, and from the point of view of others, one great fault," wrote Yeats. "They have made their work literature rather than science, and told us of the Irish peasantry rather than of the primitive religion of mankind, or whatever else the folklorists are on the gad after." The spirit with which they had adapted the tales to a modern audience's needs was harum-scarum (Croker and Lover), seriously good-humored (Kennedy), poignant and tender (Lady Wilde); they had not tabulated what they had heard, or what they knew, "in forms like grocers' bills—item the fairy king, item the queen." Yeats was not interested in emphasizing any single mood or phase of Irish life. Like Douglas Hyde, the authority whom he trusted most of all, Yeats sought to establish a sense of life that had elements of both humor and mournfulness.

Perhaps the most interesting single passage came at the beginning of the section on "The Trooping Fairies," for at that early point Yeats sought, for the sake of clarity, to judge the merits of the three important theories seeking to establish the true nature of the *daoine sidhe* (the fairy people). The first theory was that of the peasants, who claimed that fairies were fallen angels "who were not good enough to be saved, nor bad enough to be lost." The caprice of the fairies, "their way of being good to the good and evil to the evil, having every charm but conscience," suggested, in story after story, that their evil, which was "wholly without malice," had saved them from being lost. (Yeats

seemed to favor this interpretation.) The second theory was promulgated by the Book of Armagh: fairies were the gods of the earth. Mystic and occult writers, among them Paracelsus and Éliphas Levi, believed that these creatures changed "according to their whim, or the mind that sees them," and were not of heaven but of this realm. A third theory, that fairies were the gods of pagan Ireland, was advanced by Irish antiquarians, who based their reasoning upon linguistic and archeological evidence; but Yeats had small patience with the view that fairies once upon a time had been the "*Tuatha De Danān*, who, when no longer worshipped and fed with offerings, dwindled away in the popular imagination, and now are only a few spans high."

The amorality of the *sidhe* was to become an article of faith with Yeats. They were not accountable by human standards; the child who wandered "with a fairy hand in hand" to the "leafy island" near Sleuth Wood was escaping from a world "more full of weeping" than he could understand; and though he left forever the lowing calves "on the warm hill-side," the kettle singing peacefully away on the hob, and the brown mice bobbing "round and round the oatmeal chest," he went to a society of dancing fairies.

To and fro we leap,  
And chase the frothy bubbles,  
While the world is full of troubles,  
And is anxious in its sleep.  
Come away! O, human child!

For them, song and dance were primary occupations. As Yeats argued with deep earnestness, many of Ireland's "old beautiful tunes" were the music of the *sidhe*.

"The Celtic Twilight" has become a descriptive tag, if not an epitaph, for the writings of an entire school. It connotes vagueness and shadows. But the book bearing that title is far from *fin-de-siècle* in its atmosphere; it is made of sterner stuff. Walter Starkie, who used to carry a copy on his walks through western Ireland, speaks of it as "full of freshness and early-morning sunshine," and adds that it "might have been written in the open air."<sup>4</sup> Yeats was attempting to write down "accurately and candidly" what he had heard and seen. His

preface to the original edition announced proudly that, "except by way of commentary," he had added nothing that he had "merely imagined." He thought of his diary as a record of what his nation truly was. "I have desired, like every artist, to create a little world out of the beautiful, pleasant, and significant things of this marred and clumsy world, and to show in a vision something of the face of Ireland to any of my own people who look where I bid them. . . . I have, however, been at no pains to separate my own beliefs from those of the peasantry, but have rather let my men and women, dhoul and fairies, go their way unoffended or defended by any argument of mine." He had no thesis to expound, and if, in preparing a new edition for 1902, he began to refer to his work as a "handful of dreams," light enough for a young man to dream, it is important to remember that he originally did not argue in these terms; that he wrote *The Celtic Twilight* as a reporter unwilling to differentiate between fruit and flower; and that, indeed, he thought that whatever went into the weaving of the first pattern deserved to be called "threads of life," for which no man, himself least of all, needed to "buy pardon" by the preparation of a "systematical and learned" "big book about the commonwealth of faery."

Hence, these stories, impressions, jottings, are given to us in a straightforward, matter-of-fact presentation. They all have an easy-going colloquial lucidity. The chapter heading for one of the stories, a rambling account of the adventures of two brothers, Jack and Bill, might apply to all the stories: "Dreams That Have No Moral." Like Synge, who supposedly pressed his ear to the chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where he was staying, to eavesdrop on what the servant girls were saying in the kitchen, Yeats seems to be overhearing his friends, his relatives, old men and women, strangers in trains, and the "village people," as they discussed their encounters with the people of Faery. Many of the tales Yeats attributes to an elderly, eccentric, and deaf Paddy Flynn in his small cabin at Ballisodare, who is unaccountably cheerful despite his misfortunes. The tone of the entire volume is pleased that somehow so much has been brought back from the Enchanted Woods; that somehow we have learned so much about the children of the twilight.

Yeats's doctrine was shaped most significantly in a section on "The Golden Age." Yeats, a passenger on a train approaching Sligo, remembered an earlier occasion when he had seen two animals, one pink and whitish, representing goodness and day, and the other black, representing night and evil. This vision had come to him while he lay between sleeping and waking. Now, aboard the train, a fiddler made sounds that filled him with troubled thoughts, "the strangest emotions," and "a message of another kind." "A voice of lamentation" seemed to be speaking to him "out of the Golden Age." "It told me that we are imperfect, incomplete, and no more like a beautiful woven web," Yeats went on, "but like a bundle of cords knotted together and flung into a corner. It said that the world was once all perfect and kindly, and that still the kindly and perfect world existed, but buried like a mass of roses under many spadefuls of earth. The faeries and the more innocent of the spirits dwelt within it, and lamented over our fallen world in the lamentation of the wind-tossed reeds, in the song of the birds, in the moan of the waves, and in the sweet cry of the fiddle." In a world where the clever and the beautiful were not necessarily one and the same, the sad voices must continue to sing, and human beings in the real world to weep, "until the eternal gates swing open."

The Golden Age, as Yeats described it, has no theological implications. Although he spoke of a "fallen world" and "eternal gates," as in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, his mind was more on the melancholy nature of a world from which kindness had been evicted, or replaced by "a little vulgarity." The nature of the sin which has overtaken "the faeries and the more innocent of the spirits" remained mysterious, as if it were the one thing Yeats had not overheard.

Not that he failed to listen hard. Yeats's ancestors came from Rosses and Drumcliff, and whatever they could tell him, he remembered with total recall. But the verbal counters of "good" and "evil" eluded precise definition in Yeats's work. "There is nothing sinister about the Sidhe in themselves," as Edmund Wilson once said; "they are non-moral and relieved of mortal cares; for them, there is not even time; and from our human point of view, their fairy point of view is un-

seizable.”<sup>5</sup> Even to talk of them could be dangerous. The woman who lived near the “seaward angle of Ben Bulbin” told Yeats, in answer to his request for stories about them, “They always mind their own affairs and I always mind mine.”

Hence, *The Celtic Twilight* illuminates several aspects of Yeats’s concept: the innocence of the faeries, their amorality, their unknowableness. “No matter what one doubts, one never doubts the faeries. . . .” We shall make little of him, in the words of J. I. M. Stewart, if we are unable to believe that the elemental creatures did really go to and fro about his table,<sup>6</sup> for everything is predicated upon that. The view of J. Middleton Murry, expounded during the early 1930’s, that Yeats failed to become a great poet because he mistook his phantasmagoria for the product of the creative imagination, or (as Murry preferred to believe) he made an effort to discipline them to his poetic purpose and was unsuccessful,<sup>7</sup> woefully misses the mark. All nature to Yeats was full of invisible people who might be ugly or grotesque, wicked or foolish, or indescribably beautiful; “they live out their passionate lives not far off, as I think, and we shall be among them when we die if we but keep our natures simple and passionate.”

In the Ireland of even the late Victorian Age, poor people, unsophisticated by the wisdom of cities, could see these creatures more often than the worldly-wise; and the “never-fading mystery” of the Irish countryside was most accessible to “the wise peasant.” Yeats admired the Irish as image-makers, and claimed that they had been image-makers since the dawning of time. Once it was possible to see gods everywhere, in the Golden Age that had since passed, and “the stories of that communion are so many that I think they outnumber all the like stories of all the rest of Europe.” Yeats hoped (he was to meet frustration in this desire) that educated people could will themselves into a condition of quiet “that is the condition of vision,” and he delighted in the “waking dreams” that sometimes overtook him, and which were beyond the power of his will “to alter in any way.”<sup>8</sup> He knew the ways of visionaries; he observed “the fashion of their speech.” Like the ancient map-makers who wrote across areas of *terra incognita* the phrase “Here are lions,” he delighted in identifying “the villages of

fishermen and turners of the earth" with the line "Here are ghosts."<sup>9</sup> In all honesty, he could not testify that he shared the trances of those who actually saw little people. "I tell these things as accurately as I can," he wrote after a particularly disappointing session with a seer, "and with no theories to blur the history. Theories are poor things at the best, and the bulk of mine have perished long ago."<sup>10</sup>

*The Celtic Twilight* is an astonishing performance because its artlessness disguises an emerging art of the highest order, Yeats's assimilation of the Irish art of story-telling. It did not come naturally to a young man who had lived much in London and associated with sophisticated city-dwellers. The skill may be heard in the rhythm of such a sentence as "There suddenly appeared at the western corner of Market Street, Sligo, where the butcher's shop now is, as did a palace in Keats's Lamia, an apothecary's shop, ruled over by a certain unaccountable Dr. Opendon," with its emphases on the "suddenly" catching our attention early; its easy use of circumstantial detail and the exact geographical fact; its reminder that an Irish anecdote and Keats's "doubtful tale from faery land,/Hard for the non-elect to understand" have much in common; and the thumping stresses that conclude the line, "a certain unaccountable Dr. Opendon." What happens next in any of these stories is as unaccountable, and unpredictable, as in any story told by the fireside. The matter-of-factness of a story's beginning—"The High Queen of Ireland had died in childbirth, and her child was put to nurse with a woman who lived in a little house within the border of the wood"—go well with the bareness of the vocabulary and the simple rightness of the epithets ("a thin voice") and of the images ("of a height more than human," "a drop of blood, grey as the mist"). In the world of long ago, miracles "were a little thing"; but Yeats's point, made subtly and with great effect, is that the prose which describes them need not be a big thing, heavy with the jewels of mock-medieval diction. Moreover, as Yeats noted in a postscript added to later editions of *The Celtic Twilight*, folk art may be called the "oldest of the aristocracies of thought, and because it refuses what is passing and trivial, the merely clever and pretty, as certainly as the vulgar and insincere, and because it has gathered into itself the simplest and most



unforgettable thoughts of the generations, it is the soil where all great art is rooted."

For Yeats, imagination was more than the key which would unlock the gate that barred one from the fuller life; it was the man himself. But not all men. It had to be cultivated with "much labour," one's character had to be congenial, "happy circumstance" had to conspire, and even so only "three or four thousand out of millions" could understand "imaginative things." It was possible, as Yeats wrote at the end of his chapter on "Enchanted Woods," that death might unite our simple and passionate natures "to all romance, and that some day we shall fight dragons among blue hills"; but for a man unwilling to admit the fact of middle-age, some work of noble note might yet be done before death. The reviving of old songs, the gathering of old stories into books, the remembering of forgotten mythologies, became for Yeats the means of intensifying his Irishness, and ultimately of re-awakening memories of imaginative tradition among the Irish people as a whole.

## V: Personal Relationships:

MADAME BLAVATSKY, THE RHYMERS, AND EDWIN ELLIS

The pattern of any man's life, viewed from a distance, makes reasonable sense. Yet, as an example of how the passing of time distorts our sense of what actually happened, John McNeill, a teacher of Yeats at the High School, Dublin, remembered, many years after the event, a conversation in the College Park shortly after Yeats had left school: "He confided to me all his plans for the future as to writing and reciting poetry—plans which he stuck to firmly and carried out fully."<sup>1</sup> Yeats must have discussed his plans in generalized terms. All the evidence suggests that during the 1890's he avoided committing himself to a long-range program; that, much as he relished the shock of interacting ideas, he did not quarrel violently with his friends when their interests divided; and that he tested and turned away from theosophy, the aesthetic creed of the Decadents, and Blake's visions, keeping only what he needed and found valuable for his craft. Yeats was exhilarated by the years of romantic Ireland's glory, when the swan drifted upon a darkening flood, and much of his life during this decade was improvised from one project to the next, from one set of interests to another.

Charles Johnston's service in introducing Yeats to Madame Blavatsky (May, 1887) was important for a number of reasons. Yeats needed the orientation toward a system of values he could respect. (T. R. Henn suggests that his "innate love of ritual and secret societies" might have been fostered "by his own awkwardness and loneliness.")<sup>2</sup> He was to draw upon the convenient images available in the literature of the Theosophical Society in London (founded in 1878) and the Blavatsky Lodge (formed in 1887). Madame Blavatsky's follower, Mohini J. Chatterji, met Yeats in Dublin, a factor important in Yeats's choice of India as the locale of several poems written during the 1880's. Yeats's activities in the Dublin Hermetic Society (which he and Charles Johnston organized), the Blavatsky Lodge, and the Esoteric Section of the Lodge, led him to intensive reading in A. P. Sinnett's *Theosophical Studies*, *The Occult World*, and *Esoteric Buddhism*, as well as in Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*; to the trac-

ing of elaborate correspondences between events in Gaelic mythology and mystical cycles and rebirths; to the conducting of seances; to the use of the language and methods of science for passionately anti-scientific conclusions; to the re-examination of key statements by Shelley and Blake for theosophical implications; and to an intensified sense of the holiness of what can only be partially perceived.<sup>3</sup>

But he found it difficult to regard Theosophy as ultimate truth, and he soon learned that he would never experience a true mystical communion. After 1890 he had too much to occupy his time to serve in any important or regular capacity within the Lodge, and certainly no desire to become involved in quarrels between the volatile Madame Blavatsky and various disciples whom she temporarily banished from her favors. The tone of the anecdote (Yeats repeated it often) in which "a big materialist sat on the astral double of a poor young Indian"<sup>4</sup> was irreverent and perhaps malicious. Yeats enjoyed his evening sessions, and learned more about the relationship between private eccentricities and public influence; the movement of Theosophy, after all, was attracting disciples throughout the world. But a man who could speak of Madame Blavatsky in 1889 as "a cat in a cage full of canaries"<sup>5</sup> was not about to fall in adoration at her feet. To John O'Leary he confided that he had no theories about her; that she was simply "a note of interrogation"; and that she was "the most human person alive . . . like an old peasant woman. . . ."<sup>6</sup> He felt affection for her, and laughed at her joshing comment that shaving off his beard had destroyed some mesmeric force in him. Even before her death in 1891, and long before the storm that swirled around the authenticity of the "messages" received by William Q. Judge (who was attempting to take over the leadership of the Society from Mrs. Annie Besant), Yeats found it impossible to continue placating the Theosophists who objected to his opinion on Madame Blavatsky's review, *Lucifer*; as a consequence, he withdrew from "all active work in the society."

Replacing some of the time that he had devoted to discussions of theosophical issues was Yeats's involvement, for approximately four years, with the activities of the loosely organized Rhymers' Club. *The Book of the Rhymers' Club* (1892) and the *Second Book of the Rhym-*

*ers' Club* (1894) reprinted what Yeats regarded as some of his "best lyrics," all of them Irish in subject-matter; they did not mark a significant change in the kind of Celticism for which Yeats was already noted.

Most of the other poems in the two volumes do not possess great merit. However, a pleasing variety exists: Johnson's "By the Statue of King Charles the First at Charing Cross"; Greene's modern cry of outrage at the notion that a high-road might be constructed over Keats's grave; Rhys's poignant image of Chatterton in Holborn; Radford's sneer at "London's damndèd money mart"; Le Gallienne's more sentimental phrase, "the iron lilies of the Strand." Some poems awkwardly use such words as "multitudinous" and "whereinto"; others are daring enough to parody Donne (Symons's "A Variation upon Love"); many express a love of London (Greenwich Park, Covent Garden, "the roaring Strand," and the Cheshire Cheese itself, where the meetings of the Club were often held).

The members—Ernest Dowson, Edwin J. Ellis, G. A. Greene, Lionel Johnson, Richard Le Gallienne, Victor Plarr, Ernest Radford, Ernest Rhys, T. W. Rolleston, Arthur Symons, John Todhunter, Arthur Cecil Hillier (a new name in the second volume), and Yeats—varied strikingly in ages and concepts of poetry. The Rhymers' Club listened to Yeats, but he was not the only talker, or even the most scintillating. "To identify the Rhymers' Club with the esthetic movement of the 'nineties," Mark Longaker has written, "or with decadence, or with any other so-called movement is a convenience for literary historians, but of dubious critical worth."<sup>7</sup>

Yeats confided to Katharine Tynan in July, 1891, that his association with the members of the Rhymers' Club had provided him with "a certain amount of influence with reviewers,"<sup>8</sup> and he early recognized the multiple values of the chance to talk with professional poets about the ideas promulgated by *Marius the Epicurean*, the *Symbolistes* of France, other Celtic scholars and popularizers, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Nietzsche. Without rules, officers, formal organization, or literary platform, the meetings were amiably English.<sup>9</sup> The Club observed a "discreet conviviality," in Le Gallienne's phrase. Nevertheless, even

before the second volume, Yeats knew that its dissolution as a literary society impended. When he sent John O'Leary a copy of *The Second Book*, he distinguished between the meritorious productions of Plarr, Dowson, Johnson, and Le Gallienne, and the "intolerably bad" poems of the Trinity College men (Rolleston, Hillier, Todhunter, and Greene). The rest is anecdote: the way in which poets and publishers shared the cost of printing; the genuine, though modest, success of both volumes; and Yeats's quotable reminiscences, recorded in the twentieth century.

In March, 1910, Yeats shaped a lecture on contemporary poetry for a private drawing-room in London, and at that time he over-simplified the doctrine preached by a majority of the Rhymers: "... lyric poetry should be personal. . . . a man should express his life and do this without shame or fear."<sup>10</sup> He romanticized the poverty of the Rhymers,<sup>11</sup> and it was certainly not a "tragic generation" in the way that Yeats described it. Only three of the Rhymers—Johnson, Davidson, and Dowson—led tragic and foredoomed existences. Through discussion and argument, and over an extended period of association, Yeats was to refine some of his attitudes toward craft.

In particular, knowledge of Arthur Henry Hallam's essay, "On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry," which had been published in *The Englishman's Magazine* (August, 1831), gave him a great advantage in discourse over his fellow-Rhymers. The essay prefigured many of the concepts of Symbolism. Its denial that "reflective" poetry was the highest species of poetry encouraged Yeats to believe that "the desire of beauty" was the predominant motive of a true poet's creation. For Yeats, as for Hallam, picturesque images and the full, deep feelings of music, captured in a poetry of sensation, were preferable to the best that might be worked out in a poetry of reflection. Hallam's enthusiasm for an "art free and unalloyed" amounted to an advocacy of a "pure" poetry a half-century ahead of its time. Yeats used the essay again and again to justify the writing of magical verse; as Hallam said, such verse produced "a number of impressions, too multiplied, too minute, and too diversified to allow of our tracing them to their cause, because just such was the effect, even so boundless and so bewildering, produced on [the] imaginations [of poets writing such verse] by the real appearance

of Nature." Yeats's familiarity with Hallam's thesis meant that, in his discussions with fellow-Rhymers, he could refer knowledgeably to the concepts of color and light which had inspired English landscape artists; to Burke's concept of the sublime; and to a growing alienation between poet and public. It was comforting for Yeats to think that an indolent reader would not appreciate the new poetry because he hated "*to start from the same point*" (Hallam's italics) as the poet.

From Edwin John Ellis, "wild" and ultimately frustrating as he was, Yeats derived much of the inspiration necessary for the close examination of Blake's doctrines. *The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical*, published in three volumes in 1893, represented Yeats's most important examination of mystical doctrine. Ellis, an undistinguished painter who, for a short period, shared a studio with John Butler Yeats, and a poetaster whose *Sanctus the Bard* (1895) was to serve as partial inspiration for Yeats's *The King's Threshold*, contributed most of the explanatory text. He considerably expanded a sketch of Blake's life which Yeats had written, and provided "the account of the minor poems, & the account of Blake's art theories. . . ."<sup>12</sup> Yeats and Ellis discussed all aspects of the book before releasing any of the text to the printer (although Ellis was sometimes difficult to get in touch with). Yeats, however, contributed the major part of the analysis of the "symbolic system." As he wrote to Elkin Mathews in an undated letter: "... after reading our book no one at any rate will ever say again that he [Blake] was mad unless they are also prepared to say as much for every other mystic who ever lived. As we go on working at him it becomes more and more clear that hardly any fragment of his poetry can be understood as he understood it, by any reader, until his system is also understood, and that this book of ours should make people take him much more seriously. His lyrics even will seem more beautiful when they have taken their place in his general system."<sup>13</sup> But he admitted, in a note added to his own copy, that he had been too positive about some of his interpretations of Blake's intention, particularly in relation to the "circulation of the Zoas," as well as the significance of seldom-mentioned personages.<sup>14</sup>

Yeats and Ellis read and criticized each other's poetry, and Yeats

found Ellis's warmly enthusiastic remarks both perceptive and useful. For example, Yeats read *John Sherman* to Ellis, who suggested "alterations of much importance" that in turn delayed submission of the manuscript to a publisher. Yeats's evaluation of Ellis's work was, in like fashion, qualified. Yeats acknowledged some individually fine images, and made various efforts to publicize Ellis as a "genius" who had been hiding away in Italy until very recently, but "on the whole," as he wrote to Katharine Tynan (January 31, 1889), "his verses lack emotional weight."<sup>15</sup>

The collaboration on the Blake edition involved trips to remote locations where manuscripts might be copied; clairvoyant experiments with Ellis as audience and Yeats as mesmerist; the writing of articles about Blake to stimulate interest in the forthcoming edition; lecturing on Blake at the "Odd Volumes" dinner; and a number of voyages between Ireland and England. Yeats feared Ellis's impetuosity and "terrible activity," because he believed Ellis simply did not know enough about mystical thinking. During a brief lull (while Ellis was lecturing), Yeats confided to John O'Leary, "He may awake at any moment however and attack my province with horse, foot and artillery. The boundary mark between his and mine being a not over well defined bourne. I had to put up a notice against trespassers a couple of weeks ago."<sup>16</sup> By February, 1891, the strain of the collaboration began to tell on Yeats; he felt a prisoner of Blake; nor were his fears of a collapse lightened by the hysteria of Mrs. Ellis, who complained of Yeats's mesmeric powers and "the unseen universe" in such forceful terms that Yeats and Ellis had to confer almost anywhere except at Ellis's house. (Many years later, Yeats, visiting Ellis in Paris, was shocked to discover how "intolerable" Mrs. Ellis was.)<sup>17</sup>

Yeats, like most authors, grew depressed by the printing errors which appeared, like dragon's teeth, immediately upon publication. The regular edition consisted of 500 copies, and a large paper edition, more elegantly printed, of 150 copies. Yeats received no payment for his work other than thirteen copies of the latter edition, and when he asked old Bernard Quaritch for "half profits," he received the dispiriting reply, "No, young man. This would be robbery. I would send you nothing for six months, and then a bill for extra expenses."<sup>18</sup>

One need not claim more for the edition than that it persuaded people (as Yeats said) "Blake knew what he was talking about if we do not. . . ."<sup>19</sup> Yeats gave away his own copies, and, whenever he saw the edition in someone else's library, was apt to murmur that he longed to correct every page. Moreover, Yeats and Ellis were not textual scholars in a modern sense. Some of their alterations, as Geoffrey Keynes pointed out in his bibliography of writings by and about Blake, were "intentional" as well as the accidents of amateur copyists. Bungling printers must not be held responsible for Yeats's peculiar views on the Irish ancestry of William Blake. Although the edition was superior to any Victorian edition of Blake's writings, it was soon superseded, and is today of primary interest to persons concerned with Blake's posthumous reputation or with Yeats's development.

Yeats learned from Blake how to liberate himself "from formulas and theories of several kinds," and the value of Blake's work, as Richard Ellmann had indicated, is not to be measured by the use of specific symbols, "but in the fact that from 1890 on there is a gradually increasing pressure in his poetry from powerful congeries of symbolic images."<sup>20</sup> The parallels with Blake's system are easier to trace in *A Vision* than in anything written during this decade; but the contrasts there are no less striking than the similarities, and Yeats never permanently subscribed himself as a disciple. One critic, after a lengthy examination of the relationship between the two poets, concluded, "Yeats knew he was not like his master, Blake, and knew exactly why; he . . . had no supernatural vision because he was too much interested in himself and the division in himself to be open to grace."<sup>21</sup>

Ellis, through his hard-driving, compulsive collaboration with the younger Yeats, must be given a large share of the credit for making possible the completion of what Yeats, with some justice, regarded as his most important project to date. His contacts with Ellis after the publication of the Blake edition became increasingly erratic and infrequent, but in his *Poems* of 1895, he dedicated a revised version of *The Wanderings of Oisín* to Ellis as a token of his appreciation. Even more strikingly, he was to write in 1922, four years after Ellis's death,



that he may have owed his mastery to verse to Edwin Ellis's instruction.<sup>22</sup>

More precisely, Yeats, during this eventful decade, was deepening his understanding of the literary style that was right for him.

## VI: Irish Subject-Matter

It is against the background of these relationships that Yeats's poems, with their curious emphases and their occasionally monotonous images, can best be seen. These lyrics might be individually beautiful, or haunting, or effective; but to Yeats they were, from the beginning, moments of development. Few poets can have been so certain that any single poem must bear some relationship to a larger goal: self-definition, the opening-up of Irish legends to a program of literary exploitation, or the encouragement of fellow toilers in the vineyard. As a consequence, the desirability of changing his texts to correspond with modified or enlarged objectives was stronger than many of his contemporary readers appreciated. He amended, suppressed, and sometimes drastically altered the intention of a poem. In our own time only Auden has rewritten his own history so often. "Few poets," wrote T. R. Henn, "have ever revised so positively, continuously, radically as Yeats. No poet has so changed his meanings as he stitched and unstitched."<sup>1</sup>

Ballads such as "The Ballad of Father O'Hart," drawn from a story of an eighteenth-century priest recounted to Yeats by the priest of Collooney, were based on Irish history and legend commingled: "When writing I went for nearly all my subjects to Irish folklore and legends, much as a Young Ireland poet would have done. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Yeats's ballads were traceable to such things as an incident in one of Kickham's novels; a sermon preached in a chapel at Howth; and (in a letter dated March 16, 1892) "a curious piece of folk-lore" given to a friend, who then recounted it to Yeats, who in turn willingly ascribed it to "the peasantry of Castleisland, Kerry." Yeats then added (somewhat truculently, inasmuch as he was denying a charge of plagiarism), "It may comfort your correspondent, however, to know that even if I had seen Tristram St. Martin's ballad before writing mine, and had never heard the story apart from the ballad, I should none the less have considered myself perfectly justified in taking a legend that belonged to neither of us, but to the Irish people."<sup>3</sup> Yeats even annotated lexical items—for example, "Shoneen" and "Sleiveen" in "The Ballad of Father O'Hart"—to help the reader appreciate the tone of a ballad.

Believing that no writer who drew upon Irish legendry could consider himself original, Yeats created and kept returning to a special kind of protagonist: an aged, disenchanted, and enervated hero, who contemplated his prime of manhood either in bitterness or melancholy, and who considered the rich past as long gone. Father John O'Hart, one such hero, died at ninety-four. Half the ballad about him described the keening of the world and reproved those "who dig old customs up." (Collooney is located a few miles from the town of Sligo, which Yeats, writing to Katharine Tynan in 1889, said, had "really influenced [his] life the most."<sup>4</sup> "The Ballad of the Foxhunter"—which suggested to one of Ellis's friends the possibility of a picture to be titled "The March Past," with "hounds and horse being led past their dying owner"<sup>5</sup>—dramatized the end of an old man's dream; the hounds were aged, one was blind; even Huntsman Rody would not blow his horn. Father Gilligan, an exhausted priest, "weary night and day," spoke of his being without rest; and finally thanked God for having had pity "on the least of things." The protagonist might also be a heroine. Moll Magee, an old woman, remembered her work salting herrings before her husband, "a fisher poor," drove her from his door. She hoped that her man would come and fetch her home again, but resignation rather than genuine hope colored her expression.

Nor was this dispiritedness limited to moments of awareness that the snows of yesteryear had melted. When Yeats described the world of his own time, greyness colored his image of the city, as in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree,"<sup>6</sup> and ultimately of the heart that must remain in bondage to the roadways and pavements of modern living. In his dedicatory poem for *Representative Irish Tales* (1891), Yeats spoke of "the barren boughs of Eire." In general, the language of men in exile—from the past, from their own best possibilities, from communion with kindred spirits—was the vocabulary of those poems in which Yeats treated Irish subject-matter.

Yeats adapted the spellings of Gaelic names to the rhyme-schemes of his poems, and shifted from "somebody's perhaps fanciful phonetic spelling" to "the ancient spelling" as he found it in "some literal translation." He admitted, in later years, that he "had hardly considered the

question seriously." Yeats's version of the Irish past was more lugubrious than his materials justified. He posited his own melancholia—

For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand—  
against the world of dancing and singing faeries:

Where dips the rocky highland  
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,  
There lies a leafy island. . . .

The man who dreamed of Faeryland "stood among a crowd at Dro-mahair," "wandered by the sands of Lissadell," "mused beside the well of Scanavin," and "slept under the hill of Lugnagall." On the one side, youth, foolishness, and "never a crack in my heart." On the other, "the beech leaves old," the lover "full of tears," the unwanted wisdom of awakened man.

In a remarkable grouping of poems that he finally gathered in *The Rose* (1893), Yeats experimented with a symbol that for centuries had represented different things to Assyrians, Egyptians, and Christians. Its utility lay primarily in its multi-layered meanings to *Irish* bards: "sometimes as a religious symbol, as in the phrase, 'the Rose of Friday,' meaning the Rose of austerity, in a Gaelic poem in Dr. Hyde's 'Religious Songs of Connacht,' and, I think, . . . a symbol of woman's beauty in the Gaelic song, 'Roseen Dubh' and a symbol of Ireland in Mangan's adaptation of 'Roseen Rose.'"<sup>7</sup> Yeats's grafting of Rosicrucian doctrine and the occult ideal onto this vision of an eternal Beauty (so that it became a flower blossoming upon the Tree of Life) was, as one critic has noted, an uneasy ambivalence: "For the flower that embraces both time and eternity presents them not as harmonious but rather as separate realms unhappy for want of each other."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the poems, cutting free from the mannered elegances of the sixteen poems collected as "Crossways" in *Poems* (1895), employed the rose in any number of ways, and ultimately became a way of looking at life.

"To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" treated the rose as poetic inspiration. The closer it came to the poet, the better able he was to sing of Cuchulain, of the Druid who enchanted Fergus, and of "old Eire and the ancient ways." Yet the poem's qualification was impor-

tant: treating the "eternal beauty" inherent "in all poor foolish things that live a day," Yeats would also have liked to keep the best of what was ordinary, weak, and common. A proud red rose that cast a spell of forgetfulness—the Intellectual Beauty of Shelley's Rose, the Heaven of Dante's Rose—would, despite all its splendor, remove him from contact with "heavy mortal hopes," and he did not wish to be so completely isolated from his passing world.

In "The Rose of the World," beauty passed "like a dream," and the entire world became a path over which the "wandering feet" of the Rose of the World travelled. The rose had served as an inspiration for Troy and Usna's children; its fate changed from generation to generation, like the souls of men "that waver and give place" and the "passing stars, foam of the sky."

In "The Rose of Peace," Yeats spoke of the rose as forgetfulness, the power to make angels as well as men oblivious to their past and to their responsibilities. If Michael beheld the rose, he "would his deeds forget"; and

God would bid his warfare cease,  
Saying all things were well. . . .

Yeats was uncertain how the symbol came to Ireland—during medieval times or in a line of descent from Celtic tradition. He believed that the Gaelic poets associated it with "goddesses who gave their names to Ireland . . . for such symbols are not suddenly adopted or invented, but come out of mythology." In "The Rose of Battle," the symbol, which made men indifferent, was itself not indifferent to the deeds of men; it visited the battlefields, and beheld "the wharves of sorrow."

The most interesting single poem of this gathering was "To Ireland in the Coming Times." It restated Yeats's conviction that poems on Beauty and on her "red-rose-bordered hem" entitled him to be accounted "true brother of a company" of popular Irish poets: including, among others, Davis, Mangan, and Ferguson. He thought of himself as more Irish than Maud Gonne or John O'Leary had realized. Despite his unwillingness to ally his poetry with partisan causes, he claimed that he had rendered rich service to his nation by speaking

Of things discovered in the deep,  
Where only body's laid asleep. . . .

Yet the defensiveness implicit in the original title, "Apologia Addressed to Ireland in the Coming Days," suggested that Yeats, in seeking to immortalize Maud Gonne and to do so by exploiting the public and traditional meanings of the rose symbol, anticipated censure because his volume was not dedicated to the cause of nationalism. Beauty may indeed have been the first to make "Ireland's heart begin to beat," and ultimately it might lead all Irishmen to "truth's consuming ecstasy," where existed

No place for love and dream at all;  
For God goes by with white footfall.

But, in the words of Barbara Seward, this was "esoteric nationalism," open to misinterpretation; for years, Yeats's position was to be considered vulnerable.<sup>9</sup>

The humorlessness of most of this poetry—one critic coined a phrase, "the muse of the soggy handkerchief," to describe the inspiration behind the "neurasthenic, careworn" poetry Yeats was specializing in<sup>10</sup>—and its over-emphasis on formal correctness in matters of versification, are serious enough charges; conjoined with the intellectual uncertainty of a private vision (which Yeats insisted was "patriotic" in the best sense), they might seem very damaging to any modern appreciation. But for Yeats, as for his contemporaries, the question of what inherently belonged to an Irish cultural tradition had not been settled; Ireland's history was both lengthy and confusing; in the words of a recent chronicler, "... it becomes almost fruitless to try to decide what is Irish and what is not."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, historiography during the 1890's was less than scientific in its examination of Celtic literature and its review of the achievements of the Irish church. "Fifty years ago," John V. Kelleher said in 1961, "the pickings were slim and were still often entangled with all too abundant propagandistic apologetics. A century ago most of these areas of study were untouched by serious modern scholarship and in others serious scholarship was just beginning."<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, Yeats was continually growing as an artist. At the be-

ginning of his career, for example, Gerard Manley Hopkins had read "The Two Titans" with mixed feelings. This poem, about which Hopkins wrote to Coventry Patmore on November 7, 1886, contained "fine lines and vivid imagery," but it also impressed the Jesuit as a "strained and unworkable allegory about a young man and a sphinx on a rock in the sea" (Hopkins was particularly concerned about such "prosaic" questions as how they got there and what they ate). Indeed, the political implications of the poem, to which the subtitle pointed, were difficult to isolate from the mystical and occult element.<sup>13</sup> Yeats omitted it from later editions; and cast "a cold eye" on any number of comparable poems he had agonized about in letters to his friends. Nevertheless, the faults of the earliest poems were not necessarily those Yeats sought to expunge, "a facile charm, a too soft simplicity." Often they had to do with an inability to recognize a congenial theme, or to value for its own sake the lyrical moment that did not relate to a larger, more general system of thought.

In the Irish poems of the 1890's, Yeats was moving toward a sense of dramatic rightness, and was establishing for himself an imaginative authority. In the dialogue, "Fergus and the Druid,"<sup>14</sup> he needed only forty lines to delineate the image of a king grown weary, a man anxious to give way to a "young subtle Conchubar" who would find easy the role of sovereign. The king had come to a lonely Druid ("No woman's loved me, no man sought my help") for "dreaming wisdom." Although Fergus had been many things, "and all these things were wonderful and great," he had wasted his blood in endless exercises of his power. The concluding lines—a direct confession of disillusionment by Fergus, who unloosed the cord that bound a "little bag of dreams"—suggested a growing wisdom in the poet himself:

Ah! Druid, Druid, how great webs of sorrow  
Lay hidden in the small slate-coloured thing!

In 1884 Yeats wrote a play about the warriors of the Red Branch House that he would never publish. In a playlet entitled "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea,"<sup>15</sup> Yeats first treated the legendary hero of the Ulster cycle. Five of his plays (written between 1903 and 1910) were to

use as protagonist this hero of pre-Christian times; and Cuchulain was to become the unifying symbol of Yeats's hopes for Ireland.

It is difficult to say what aspect of which of the complex recensions first attracted Yeats to the figure of Cuchulain. The pertinent statements made by Yeats appeared long after the poet had rationalized his interests in the King of Ulster as a rival to Faust, Hamlet, and Odysseus as a hero of Western culture; in the possibility of Cuchulain's image restoring our faith in a world purified of dross materialism, or of energizing our will to act; and in the importance of Cuchulain to the concept of Mask and Anti-Self. In a letter to Miss Elizabeth White, the sister of a professor at Trinity College, Yeats said what, in various forms, he often said during this decade: "You will find it a good thing to make verses on Irish legends and places and so forth. It helps originality and makes one's verses sincere, and gives one less numerous competitors. Besides one should love best what is nearest and most interwoven with one's life."<sup>16</sup> He was defining his own Irishry for himself in such statements. He certainly found no one source sufficient for all his needs. Indeed, D. M. Hoare suggests that Yeats based "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" on oral tradition,<sup>17</sup> and Yeats's version had relatively few links with the one source he acknowledged, Curtin's *Myths and Folk-Lore of Ireland*.<sup>18</sup>

The Sohrab-Rustum relationship—a father unwittingly slew his son after an open challenge and a stylized combat—bore some relationship to the quarrel between Oisín and Manannan, which in turn has been interpreted as an artistic sublimation of Yeats's unacknowledged quarrel with his father. Yeats was to re-work the fragment in the form of a play, *On Baile's Strand*, which he began in 1901 and reluctantly published in its present form in 1906; but even the original 86-line version, which antedated the play by a full decade, received rigorous editing. If crispness of dialogue be accounted a virtue of the later Yeats, it existed here too, as in Emer's searing lines to her son:

"There is a man to die;  
You have the heaviest arm under the sky."

Or in Cuchulain's bleak compassion after he learned that he had slain his son:



"I put you from your pain. I can no more."

Cuchulain's action in bringing back a paramour "sweet-throated like a bird" had inflamed his lawful wife Emer<sup>19</sup> and she sent her son to the Red Branch camp. He, in turn, would reveal his name and lineage only at sword's point, and only to the man in the camp bound by the same oath. Cuchulain, so pledged, felt himself challenged directly by a youth as impetuous and arrogant as himself. He triumphed, but Conchubar, fearful of a rage that might rise in Cuchulain to destroy them all, begged the Druids to enchant Cuchulain with "delusions magical"; they "took them to their mystery" for three days.

Cuchulain stirred,  
Stared on the horses of the sea, and heard  
The cars of battle and his own name cried;  
And fought with the invulnerable tide.

For Yeats, the impermanence of wave and water was to become the necessary counter-value to permanence and stillness; and if Cuchulain's murder of his son led to madness, that madness, expressed as a warring with "the bitter tide," was a commitment the implications of which Yeats believed he had to understand.<sup>20</sup>

Closer to his heart than any treatment of Cuchulain during this decade was his largely autobiographical experiment at novel-writing, *John Sherman* (1891).

The story which accompanied it, "Dhoya," described the adventures of a giant, during the pre-Pyramid age, who had been a prisoner of the Fomorians and a galley-slave, and was now deserted in the Bay of Ballah. A wild, unpredictable creature possessing great strength, Dhoya was subject to fits of fury, and his enforced loneliness increased the frequency of these fits. Under normal circumstances he was very gentle; but when these fits came upon him, animals hid from his presence. One night, at the hour of votaries, Dhoya built a fire, but the purple clouds which drifted over the moon's face signified that his sacrifice had been refused, and in despair he scattered the embers. A soft voice cried behind him, "Dhoya, my beloved," and as he approached a cave, he saw a beautiful young woman within it. Her people, as he learned,

were always happy, young, without change, like the Immortals of the first Island that Oisín had visited; but they could not love. "Only the changing, and moody, and angry, and weary can love." Dhoya lived happily, in seclusion, with his new-found mate. Then, when he returned one time from hunting, he met a man leaning on his spear-staff; they fought because the stranger wanted back "the most beautiful of our bands," and despised Dhoya as one who had "neither laughter nor singing." When Dhoya defeated him, he turned into a bundle of reeds, and Dhoya's beloved revealed to him that she was a thousand years old. "The stars rose and set watching them smiling together, and the tides ebbed and flowed, bringing mutability to all save them. But always everything changes, save only the fear of Change." Later, the stranger returned to play chess, and Dhoya, proud of his skill, accepted the challenge, only to lose (the situation is similar to the fable of "Time and the Witch Vivien"); the figures faded, and everything vanished. Dhoya wandered in anguish until he met wild horses who knew nothing of man; he leaped astride a wild gigantic black horse, urged it on to even greater speed, and finally plunged with it—a huge shadow rushing down a mountainside—into the Western Sea. The legend, Yeats assured his reader, was still talked about by the cotters of Donegal.

These character types were already fraying in Yeats's mind: the beautiful young woman whose people always danced and sang on the floor of the lake and on the islands of the lake; Dhoya himself; and the stranger. The ending suited the passion for meaningless rhetoric that Yeats perhaps never expressed more tellingly than in his note to "The Cap and Bells" (1894): "The poem has always meant a great deal to me, though, as is the way with symbolic poems, it has not always meant quite the same thing." Dhoya's belief that, while sleeping, a finger had touched him on the forehead, may have been a confession of some sort on Yeats's part; while the fits of fury which attacked Dhoya during his lonely hours, his gentleness, the pride which he took in his skill, and his anguished wanderings were by no means limited to fiction. But the slightness of the tale marked it as a pendant-piece to the longer work,  
*John Sherman.*

Yeats, some thirteen years later, was to think more highly of the

truth of his impressions of Sligo (here disguised as Ballah) than of the story itself; "written when I was very young & knew no better," as he wrote in Paul Lemperry's copy.<sup>21</sup> He exhibited a comparable diffidence in his use of the pseudonym Ganconagh (the book was published as No. 10 in "The Pseudonym Library"), and in "Ganconagh's Apology": "I am an old little Irish spirit, and I sit in the hedges and watch the world go by." The faintness and dreaminess of Ganconagh's voice when talking of "dull persons and the world's affairs," Yeats wrote, was explainable because Ganconagh had "seen all" from his "hole in the hedge." Not all that nebulous, however. The events were contemporary, the locale was familiar, and the language was restrained rather than hyperbolic.

The world of Ballah was, at first, savagely characterized by Howard—a Protestant curate who had travelled and had "religious experiences"—as an eighteenth-century town with "grey streets and grey minds," with nothing in the shops but "school-books and Sunday-school prizes." His auditor was John Sherman, a man who had "thoughts above mere eating and sleeping," and who was "not always grinding at the stubble mill." John lived comfortably and complacently in "one of those bare houses so common in country towns," in which might be found chairs of "heavy mahogany with horsehair cushions worn at the corner." Everything was clean: "There was not a fly-mark on the mirror, and all summer the fern in the grate was constantly changed." Living with his mother, who patronized and pampered him on two hundred pounds a year, he waited for his rich uncle to die, while he postponed thoughts of marriage (he had reached the age of thirty), caught eels for entertainment, cultivated his garden "among the sights and sounds of nature," and enjoyed the company of Mary Carton, "everybody's adviser," a teacher of Protestant children who lived in pleasant, warm surroundings and who, like his mother, indulged him on tea and cakes. Ireland, as John Sherman saw it, offered no challenge, but then he wanted none; and he planned to live someday in a cottage with books and etchings, and write religious essays.

On the other side of the water, far from Ballah (which Mary had called "this little backward place"), lay another world. One servant

aboard a cattle boat denominated its inhabitants as "them savages in London." John Sherman then moved to England, where his uncle had invited him into a firm of ship brokers. He and his mother went to live in a small house on the north side of St. Peter's Square, Hammersmith. "The front windows looked out on to the old rank and green square, the windows on to a little patch of garden round which the houses gathered and pressed as though they already longed to trample it out. In this garden was a single tall pear-tree that never bore fruit." During the three years of his London existence, passed quietly, John wrote infrequently to Mary, and sometimes heard from Howard, who had become an "indifferent" curate in Glasgow. But his new adventure was with Miss Margaret Leland, a young woman with "curious and vagrant taste" who liked vases, hats, ceaseless chatter, Lord Lytton, and lawn tennis; and who detested frogs, novelists who moralized about creatures like herself, serious young men, and indeed John Sherman's placid mode of living. Determined to "reform" him, she berated him, and bullied him into going to theatres, operas, and parties, while threatening to make him paint. Obsessed by the need to live in the midst of excitement, she flirted with a young Foreign Office clerk to annoy him, belittled Mary Carton, and insisted that he announce his engagement to the girl he left behind. John Sherman could not help being impressed; he began to play tennis in his dreams; "a born loungeur, riches tempted him greatly." But he shrank from committing himself; it would kill his imagination. "To marry her, he thought, was to separate himself from the old life he loved so well."

The way in which he became engaged, then grew alarmed at the finality of his move, and returned to Ballah to see once more "every familiar place and sight," is best left to a reader to discover. Much of the novel was given over to John Sherman's ingenious effort to shake himself loose from the burden of matrimony even before he assumed it, and, as one might expect, the Reverend William Howard, a worldly-wise clerical coxcomb who had already antagonized people into thoughts of popery, became the next victim of Miss Leland. "His intellect," as Yeats wrote, "was like a musician's instrument with no sounding-board," and no reader was expected to sympathize with a man

who could think cleverly and carefully, "and even with originality, but never in such a way as to make his thoughts an allusion to something deeper than themselves." It was surely not surprising that Howard should turn out to be a good tennis-player, susceptible to John Sherman's hints of Miss Leland's wealth, and ready to praise her "religious vocation," or that, in a deliciously done scene, he should be swept off his feet by her praise of his ideas and personality, and that the bella-donna-dilated pupils of her eyes should become effective agents in his undoing.

We are reading, then, the old story of the country boy outwitting his city friend; but something more. Howard, who patronized John as "half a peasant," defeated him at chess and sneered that John did not "do any of these things at all well," insulted Ballah as "intolerable" and the information that it provided as only "information," was the same fatuous curate who preached that children who die unbaptized were damned, and who lost his parish as a consequence. John Sherman, censured by Howard (as Yeats was by Katharine Tynan) for being "quite without small talk," turned out to have kept his eye on the important things. The busy nervousness of England with its passion for the improvement of others could never lead to the "Divine fulfilment" of nature in Ireland, a "fulfilment that is peace, whether it be for good or for evil, for evil also has its peace, the peace of the birds of prey." What John Sherman hoped most to gain from life in Ireland was peace within a wall. "The world," as he told Mary Carton, "will be on the outside, and on the inside we and our peaceful lives." Even though Mary at first denied his suit because she believed he had proposed out of a sense of duty, she ultimately discovered, after prayer, that she needed him as much as he needed her, and that "the rest is with God." The love she offered was not sexual: "Something in her voice told of the emotion that divides the love of woman from the love of man. She looked upon him whom she loved as full of a helplessness that needed protection, a reverberation of the feeling of the mother for the child at the breast." But John Sherman, who had returned to her from a distracted walk along enchanted paths, wanted no more from their relationship than she was now prepared to give.

Ireland, for all its isolation from the world of large concerns, had its own charm, and could provide its own satisfactions. John Sherman never directly contradicted the aspersions cast by Howard on life in Ballah; nor did he think ill of Miss Leland's way of life ("a trefoil with the fragrance of a rose"). He judged dispassionately the virtues of both existences. The important thing to note is that he finally chose Ireland as his own.

## VII: A World of Larger Concerns:

AE, ARTHUR SYMONS, AND MAUD GONNE

The movement of Yeats's art was centripetal: inward to a reasonably well-defined treasury of myth and folk-tale, which he exploited with a more or less conventional romantic idiom. Although the temptations to sentimentalize the Irish past were formidable, Yeats, conscientious about his craft, revised with sufficient rigor to keep the poetry from becoming limp. By the mid-1890's Yeats was widely regarded as the best of the Irish poets, and within a few years he was to publish *The Wind Among the Reeds*, the book which epitomized not only his personal manner but an entire school of poetry.

But the fact that Yeats never published another such book is best understood by an examination of the other interests which began to absorb his attention during this same decade, and which, in the twentieth century, were to prevent him from amiably and mindlessly repeating himself. This world of larger concerns (that is to say, larger than Ireland as the exclusive domain of a poet's art) included the right of an individual to seek an inner beauty even at the expense of claims that nationalism might make upon him, the values of French *Symboliste* poetry, and the inspiration that a beautiful woman provided for Yeats's finest love lyrics. A review of three personal relationships, with George Russell, Arthur Symons, and Maud Gonne, may demonstrate that, as the decade matured, another important movement, this one centrifugal, was complicating and rendering more interesting the pattern of Yeats's development.

The relationship between Yeats and George Russell began when both were students at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin (1884) and lasted until AE's funeral (1935), an event that deeply depressed Yeats. During this half-century Yeats formulated several different assessments of what was wrong with Russell's character. At one time he resented being "bemoralized" by his friend about not completing projects; he spoke with disdain of Russell's support of William Judge (a man whom Yeats thought a charlatan) as evidence that Russell could judge rightness and wrongness only when both were independent of

individuals. On another occasion he censured Russell—an artist—for regarding life as somehow more important than art, and tempering his views accordingly. Russell's democratic views about the nature of art were dismaying; Yeats took pride, once the affairs of the Abbey began to test his administrative talents, in his inability to suffer fools gladly; but Russell suffered them all. And Yeats, who commented with some asperity on Russell's inability to inspire younger poets to write disciplined verse (over-all, he thought Russell's influence too permissive), was baffled to the end by his friend's unwillingness to develop "passionate human relationships." He simply could not understand Russell's suspicions of poetry as a sense-stimulant: was not the stirring of the senses, after all, the function of art?

Because Russell well understood that his friendship with Yeats might damage the integrity of his own views, many of the quarrels between the two men after 1900 arose simply from AE's determination to keep a distance between himself and a superior poet. That it was from the beginning a close relationship, neither would have thought worth the dignity of a denial. Yeats found in Russell a wild freedom from fact; in Russell's "visions," a sense of the limitations of art which had been taught correctly or scientifically (Russell shared with him a distrust of the claims of rationalism); in Russell's unsystematic views, a mysticism that seemed to Yeats to have medieval overtones. He and Russell worked together on projects large and small, and the willingness with which Russell copied folk tales in the National Library for Yeats's badly printed, limited-edition collections was taken for granted. Yeats assumed that merely informing Russell he was working on an edition of Blake would stimulate the writing of a letter "with some Blake criticisms." But he went to some pains to make sure that Russell would be invited to the same parties as he,<sup>1</sup> and called the existence of this "curious Dublin visionary" to the attention of William Ernest Henley; he propagandized intensely for Russell's first volume of poems, *Homeward: Songs by the Way* (1894), and told John O'Leary that "it is about the best piece of poetical work done by an Irishman this good while back,"<sup>2</sup> although he later admitted its subject matter was not particularly Irish; and he suggested Russell's name to Sir Horace



Plunkett for the task of organizing co-operative agricultural banks in Western Ireland, a position which Russell accepted and which reshaped his life and sense of vocation.

There was, indeed, much in common between these two young men. Both recognized early their limitations as artists, and hedged their bets on the future by writing poetry and poetical drama as competitors of each other (Russell memorized every page written by Yeats<sup>3</sup>). Yeats's admiration for Russell's literary work was more than puffery. He candidly dissected the faults of Russell's poems; but *The Earth Breath* excited his envy, he memorized much of it, and insisted that Edmund Gosse read it. Yeats and Russell watched over each other, recited to each other, advised each other: Russell was convinced of Maud Gonne's unattainability long before Yeats conceded defeat, and doubtless thought Yeats too good for her, as Yeats, in turn, thought no woman good enough for Russell, even after his marriage to Miss North, "a person who sees visions and is well-bred and pleasant enough."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the kind of issue which both Yeats and Russell found most useful for their own development is best exemplified by the articles which began as notes in the Saturday issues of the *Dublin Daily Express* (September 24, October 29, and December 3, 1898), and developed "a certain organic unity," enough, at any rate, to warrant separate publication in 1899. John Eglinton (the pen name of W. K. Magee) had raised the question, "What should be the subjects of a national drama?" He denied the validity of Irish legends for the present, and stated a preference for "life at large" as reflected in the consciousness of a modern writer. Using the myths, Eglinton wrote, might produce *belles lettres*, but not a national literature. "The truth is, these subjects, much as we may admire them and regret that we have nothing equivalent to them in the modern world, obstinately refuse to be taken up out of their old environment and be transplanted into the world of modern sympathies. The proper mode of treating them is a secret lost with the subjects themselves."

Yeats immediately objected to this view, and cited Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* and Wagner's operas as national literature which had been founded on ancient legends. "Our legends," he wrote, "are always associated with

places, and not merely every mountain and valley, but every strange stone and little coppice has its legend, preserved in written or unwritten tradition. Our Irish romantic movement has arisen out of this tradition, and should always, even when it makes new legends about traditional people and things, be haunted by places." Eglinton conceded that a poet had a right to be inspired by the legends of his own country, as Ibsen had been, but this partial retreat did not mollify Yeats, who rousinglly pressed the attack: "I believe that the renewal of belief, which is the great movement of our time, will more and more liberate the arts from 'their age' and from life, and leave them more and more free to lose themselves in beauty, and to busy themselves, like all the great poetry of the past and like religions of all times, with 'old faiths, myths, dreams,' the accumulated beauty of the age." He again repudiated Arnold's position that poetry should be, or is, a criticism of life. His own doctrine—based partly, as we have seen, on Hallam's essay—declared that it was a revelation of a hidden life. Painting, poetry and music, Yeats added, might be "the only means of conversing with eternity left to man on earth."

Russell, like Yeats, was protesting on behalf of individualism, while Eglinton was pleading for "nationality" in Irish literature. Yeats, in later years, was to characterize the discussion to John Quinn as "a stirring row while it lasted,"<sup>5</sup> and Russell helped Yeats to measure the width of the chasm that divided them from critics like Eglinton. Russell praised Yeats's symbols, which were used in a "subtle and mystic art." "Externality" and positive science, "the interpreter of exterior law," denied (in Russell's words) the "communication of mind with mind in thought and without words, foreknowledge in dreams and in visions, and the coming amongst us of the dead, and of much else."<sup>6</sup>

He and Yeats, during the 1880's and 1890's, often fought against the same philistine, empiricist, or narrow nationalist. Both men were keenly enough aware of each other's weaknesses, and were to become more so as a consequence of their collaborations in the theatre. But Yeats benefited more from the friendship in professional ways than did Russell. For example, Russell's disapproval of Yeats's joining the Order

of the Golden Dawn forced Yeats to define even more sharply for himself the distinction between mysticism and magic.<sup>7</sup> To Russell, time and again, Yeats turned for documentation of a folk-tale, for interpretation of a dream or a symbol, for a statement about the olden gods made in the simplicity of natural faith. The answers were so freely given, and so much appreciated, that Yeats dedicated *The Secret Rose* (1897) to AE, who had spoken glowingly about one of its pieces, "Rosa Alchemica," as "a most wonderful piece of prose."

Another friend who contributed to Yeats's awareness of the reasons why Victorian poetry had become sterile, a fellow-member of the Rhymers' Club, and an important personage in his own right, was Arthur Symons. The sexual tragedy of Symons's life, the thin poetic talent which never amounted to as much as his friends hoped for him, his estrangement from Yeats, his mental collapse, were elements in this relationship.

Symons dedicated to Yeats *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), an historically important series of sketches, and described Yeats as "the chief representative" of Symbolism in England, his "one perfectly sympathetic reader." He alluded to lengthy discussions between himself and Yeats on "a philosophy of art," and "of other things besides art . . . other sympathies, besides purely artistic ones," i.e., Mysticism. Like Russell, Symons shared with Yeats a yearning for the ineffable, a distrust of "the variable and too clinging appearances of things." He partook with Yeats of visions of the spirits of the moon and joined him at seances. The two men even lived in a connecting apartment in Fountain Court (1895-1896), until Yeats entered upon an affair with a married woman romantically disguised as "Diana Vernon."

Symons served as a conduit between English and French cultures. He familiarized Yeats with the achievements of the Decadents, and inflamed his friend with enthusiasm for Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's *Axël* (a production of which Yeats saw in February, 1894). He may not actually have introduced Yeats to *Symboliste* technique, but Symons's admiration of Verlaine's advice—to take eloquence and wring its neck—provided for Yeats the crucial insight that English verse, no less than French, could be written without rhetoric. Sincerity, Yeats learned

from Symons, could make a scale "straight fly up and kick the beam," no matter how heavily weighted the other scale might be with carefully-wrought poetry. Symons probably provided Yeats with letters of introduction to both Verlaine (Symons had entertained Verlaine during a London visit) and Mallarmé, whom Yeats visited in Paris in 1894. Also, Symons's account of the Tuesdays of the Rue de Rome over which Mallarmé presided ("Here was a house in which art, literature, was the very atmosphere; and the master of the house, in his just a little solemn simplicity, a priest") doubtless inspired Yeats to hold a comparable series of Mondays in Woburn Buildings, London.

Nevertheless, Yeats, after ungrudging praise of "a great deal of really very fine criticism" in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, confided to Lady Gregory in March, 1900, that the philosophy of the book was "curiously vague"; Symons had "not really thought about it and contradict[ed] himself sometimes in the same sentence. . . ." The book, written over a five-year period, represented Symons's major effort to define a literary movement that had already attained middle-age in France; but Yeats's judgment was not unjust. When Symons was not being impressionistic and vague in his characterizations of the art of his major figures—Gerard de Nerval, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Jules Laforgue, Stéphane Mallarmé, the later Huysmans, and Maeterlinck<sup>8</sup>—he was uncertain about the distance from reality that *Symboliste* art must keep.<sup>9</sup> Once, in an essay on Huysmans, Symons said that "description . . . heaping up of detail . . . passionately patient elaboration" are necessary for the attainment of perfect truth through symbol; but in his analysis of *Axël* he maintained that the "worldly emphasis on 'facts'" must be attacked with fury. It hardly matters that later critics have had comparable difficulties in defining the *Symboliste* aesthetic,<sup>10</sup> or that it is fatal to assume any literary movement can propose a code of values to which all members may subscribe. Yeats responded to Mallarmé's poems and *Axël* because such documents confirmed his views. In the 1890's he was unembarrassed by the connections he saw between *Symboliste* art and the half-forgotten work of the Pre-Raphaelites. He was delighted by Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's declaration, "As for living, our servants will do that for us,"

and borrowed it as one of his two epigraphs for *The Secret Rose*.<sup>11</sup> Like the aristocrat within the play, like Symons himself, Yeats believed that only the infinite was worth attaining, and that the infinite was in the possession of the dead.<sup>12</sup>

It may be more difficult to speak objectively of Maud Gonne. Like Yeats, we remember her as a truly beautiful woman; respect her talents of rhetoric and dramatic art; and perhaps share Yeats's exasperation for the life she dedicated to politics and to human beings who were less heroic than she. Nevertheless, she was Yeats's most important single inspiration, the subject of practically all his love lyrics from 1889 until the end of the century. A recent sympathetic biographer of Maud Gonne has shown that Yeats, at first exulting in her personality, ultimately had to reject and deny what she was—in his poetry no less than in his life—before he could find a proper mask for the “mature” years of his career. He wished “to make her what she could so easily have been; what almost any other woman with her looks, born at her period, would have been; an odalisque.”<sup>13</sup>

Yeats was never far from “those ugly politics” to which she dedicated her life, and his poetry was never escapist in any simple sense. But the accusation that Yeats wanted to reduce her to a conventional woman, some kind of female slave, had substance. Many Irishmen felt as Yeats did about the dubious value of Maud Gonne's shock techniques, and wished she possessed less eloquence and more common sense.

She was everything Yeats wanted in a woman, and more. The *more* was to drive him wild over the years, lead to fruitless offers of marriage, concern over the accidents and illnesses to which she was prone, consternation at her comings and goings. During the 1890's he admired her idolatrously in his poetry, and identified her with all the great women of history and myth. She was Helen of Troy reborn (she had wanted to play in John Todhunter's drama); her red lips were comparable to those for which Usna's children had died; she was a Deirdre of the modern world. She inspired poems like “The Rose of Peace,” “The Sorrow of Love,” “When You are Old,” “The White Birds,” “A Dream of Death,” and *The Countess Cathleen*, in which she acted on April 2nd, 3rd, and 4th, 1902, at St. Teresa's Hall. She was in fact the

miracle-worker of Yeats's play, and had already earned a reputation as an open-handed great lady among the poverty-stricken inhabitants of Donegal. Yeats knew from the beginning that her political views were "sensational," but found her talk exhilarating. He arranged for her at least one special meeting of the Rhymers' Club, to accommodate her restless travel-schedule. He delighted in her campaign to bring small libraries to Irish villages as well as lecturers on cultural and political topics, and he did what he could to further her work among the evicted tenants. He cheered her inflammatory speeches on the infamy of the British, censorship, and prison conditions. He explained the Celtic Movement to her patiently more than one time, and one gathers, from plaintive remarks made in several contexts, that she may not have been a good listener. He worked with her during that crucial Jubilee summer when Nationalists were determined that Queen Victoria should entertain no illusions about the degree of Irish support for British policies. On August 10, 1898, he chaired the London Commemoration Meeting at St. Martin's Hall at which she spoke. Appalled by her recklessness, he accompanied her on the tour of Scotland, speaking with her on behalf of the '98 Centennial Association of Great Britain and France. (Later he was to describe the tour as the worst ordeal of his life.)

She was not as unappreciative of his poetic genius as he sometimes felt. After all, she freely acknowledged that his poetry had moved her greatly even before she paid her fateful visit, armed with a letter of introduction from John O'Leary, to the Yeats household in January, 1889. A favorite pastime of hers was to read to her cousin love poems by Yeats which he had copied for her into a vellum-bound manuscript book. In her relatively few unhurried moments she could even encourage Yeats to tell her more about mystical doctrines, and for a while became a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn—passing four initiations and discussing "visions." Yeats at one point even wrote to George Russell, "Maud Gonne and myself are going for a week or two perhaps to some country place in Ireland to get as you do the forms of gods and spirits and to get sacred earth for our evocation. . . . Maud Gonne has seen [a] vision of a little temple of the heroes which she pro-

poses to build somewhere in Ireland when '98 is over and to make the centre of our mystical and literary movement."<sup>14</sup>

It was all foredoomed: partly because they were at cross-purposes, she hoping to convert his talents to nationalist propaganda, he hoping that she could learn to love him romantically; she dismayed by the possible taint of Freemasonry in the Order, the ordinariness of the Order's members, the urgency of the tasks she had set herself, and he more concerned by the appalling limitations which blind hatred of the English imposed upon artists no less than nationalists. He admired her greatly; he could persuade himself he loved her; "if she said the world was flat or the moon an old caubeen tossed up into the sky I would be proud to be of her party," he wrote shortly after meeting her;<sup>15</sup> but he sometimes apologized for her to his friends. By the end of the decade he was to tell Lady Gregory—whose opinions of Maud Gonne were probably not as censorious as Maud suggested in her autobiography, *A Servant of the Queen* (London, 1938)—that the goddess of his poetry had been waging, at least in part, "the war of phantasy and of a blinded idealism against eternal law."<sup>16</sup>

Maud Gonne's papers, including a great many letters from Yeats, were lost during the Irish Civil War. As a consequence, we can never be sure that Yeats was mistaken in believing she encouraged him to think of himself as more than a friend. But, at a critical moment in his development as a poet, when like Antaeus he needed renewal from the earth, Maud Gonne's personality energized his talents. It makes a difference to all admirers of Yeats's lyrics to know that the girl who "seemed the greatness of the world in tears," who owned "moments of glad grace," who walked with "music in her face," was not merely the externalization of "the Rose in his Heart," but lived, and had an existence fully as remarkable and wondrous as the poet boasted. It was a real woman whom he supplicated to "tread softly," a real woman who was treading on his dreams.

It may be argued, of course, that each of these three figures intensified Yeats's sense of what it meant to be Irish; in important ways all of them did exactly this. Yet what impresses us as a consequence of reviewing Yeats's career, inevitably, is the sense of a human being who

refused to be narcotized by literary formulas, nationalistic cant, allegiance to his own mistakes, or the comforting popular and critical successes that signified he had arrived. The very physical appearance of a volume by Yeats published during the 1890's is less claustrophobic and ugly than that of most volumes by his contemporaries, if only because Yeats paid attention to such details of production as book illustration, binding, and printing. Yeats, eagerly seeking to identify ways in which he might relate personal friendships to a changing understanding of his literary goals, was a more out-going, less narrowly Irish, poet than he is sometimes characterized as being during the 1890's.

The extension of his poetic talent into the world of dramatic literature (and ultimately theatrical realities), was a logical next step.



## VIII: Dramatist

Lady Gregory's relationship to Yeats began late in the 1890's, lasted for a full three and a half decades, and acted as a powerful stimulus on, and determinant of, his career. That she contributed more to writings published under his name than is usually recognized needs to be stressed. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, for example, owes much of its forcefulness to its free use of the country speech that she knew so well (Yeats, dedicating the play to her, admitted as much). *The Pot of Broth* was undoubtedly more hers than his; bits and pieces of *Diarmuid and Grania* were added to supply the *lacunae* in Yeats's dictation to her. The unsatisfactory condition of *Where There is Nothing* (later entitled *The Unicorn from the Stars*) was an equally shared responsibility. Lady Gregory once said, in *Our Irish Theatre* (London, 1913), that she worked "at the plot and the construction of some of the poetic plays, especially *The King's Threshold* and *Deirdre*"; Yeats never denied that she did.

Yeats learned more about play-writing from Lady Gregory than, indeed, he learned from Edward Martyn or George Moore, his early collaborators. If there seems something incongruous about Yeats, so well-established a poet by the time he met her (no earlier than 1895), turning for guidance in dramatic matters to a widow thirteen years older than himself, but one who had yet to earn her literary fame, we must look closer at the specific benefits Yeats derived from his friendship with her during this period. They belong to three general categories: the peace of spirit which sessions at Coole House provided; some sustained work collecting folk-tales; and the impetus that created an Irish company of players for the work that was to dominate his next decade.

Lady Gregory knew Yeats's work long before 1896, when Martyn came calling with Yeats (then on a walking-tour with Symons). A pleasant luncheon engagement led to an invitation to visit Coole, and Yeats went there, for the first of several long stays, in the summer of 1897. Always something of a hypochondriac, he worried eternally about the conditions of his health, his vision, his chances of living through prolonged periods of excitement; but late in the 1890's he was wearier

than usual. Maud Gonne's conduct had baffled him to the point of aggravation, and he needed rest. In the letter to John O'Leary which first mentioned Lady Gregory's name, Yeats wrote that he had to be "very careful," and that his eyes seemed "very much dependent on his general health."<sup>1</sup> Coole Park, Gort, provided him what he needed: the conversation of an aristocratic woman who believed, as he did, that an artist needed time for the development of his insights; the stimuli of friends, whom Lady Gregory invited to her home for his sake as much as for her own; above all, the serenity of a great estate. His first summer was the first of almost twenty spent on the handsome grounds: his lovely poem, "The Wild Swans at Coole," speaks of the "nineteenth autumn" that had come upon him since he first made his count; and if his heart was "sore" while he made his latest count, it was not because the trees had lost "their autumn beauty," or the October twilight its wonder; rather, he had grown old, and had lost his kinship with swans.

But now they drift on the still water,  
Mysterious, beautiful;  
Among what rushes will they build,  
By what lake's edge or pool  
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day  
To find they have flown away?

The full story of Yeats's relationship to Lady Gregory would follow Yeats's career long beyond the terminal point of this study; but he never modified or retracted what he wrote her after the conclusion of his first summer: "Nobody has ever shown me such kindness. Everybody tells me how well I am looking, and I am better than I have been for years in truth. The days at Coole passed like a dream, a dream of peace."<sup>2</sup> He loved everything there, and if the exterior of the house had no architectural pretensions, its contents—testifying to a heritage of people with taste, who had travelled widely, who had read and admired art for its own sake—were soothingly congenial to his needs. The woman who owned the lake was to become to him "mother, friend, sister and brother" in the years ahead.

Still, for two summers he was too exhausted to write very much. He worked away on a novel, *The Speckled Bird*, completed in rough

draft but never to be published, and travelled with Lady Gregory from cottage to cottage, collaborating with her on a "big book of folk lore."<sup>3</sup> The legends and superstitions of Galway folk were an old interest of hers; she did not adopt it as a means of insuring his continuing desire to converse with her. The materials collected during the years prior to her full dedication to Abbey affairs were not published until 1920. It is today hard to date with precision the appended essays and semi-scholarly notes contributed by Yeats to the two-volume work, *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*. During this period also she gathered the materials for her *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, which she was to publish in 1902, and in a preface to which Yeats was to write: "I think this book is the best that has come out of Ireland in my time. Perhaps I should say that it is the best book that has ever come out of Ireland; for the stories which it tells are a chief part of Ireland's gift to the imagination of the world—and it tells them perfectly for the first time."<sup>4</sup> The praise was over-generous; a competent translation was hardly creation in the same sense as original poetry; but Yeats was expressing here, as elsewhere, his appreciation of the debt he owed her for the ideas, allusions, and anecdotes contained in her notebooks and conversation, and which he converted into essays like "The Prisoners of the Gods" (*The Nineteenth Century*, January, 1898); "The Broken Gates of Death" (*The Fortnightly Review*, April, 1898); "The Celtic Element in Literature" (*Cosmopolis*, June, 1898); and "Celtic Beliefs about the Soul," a review of *The Voyage of Bran*, by Kuno Meyer and Alfred Nutt (*The Bookman*, September, 1898).

Lady Gregory's contribution to the development of the Abbey Theatre would have been inconceivable without Yeats's challenge to her sense of responsibility toward Irish culture; but the converse was equally true. Yeats, dabbling with the notion of "taking or building a little theatre somewhere in the suburbs to produce romantic drama," needed more than anything else the financial backing of a sponsor. It may well have been mere luck—the wetness of the weather which prevented Martyn, Yeats, and Lady Gregory from going out—that led to the significant conversation about plays and means of staging them (recounted in *Our Irish Theatre*), at the home of the Comte de Basterot.

It was a meeting of mutual sympathies: Martyn had already completed *The Heather Field* and *Maeve*, and Yeats was ready with *The Countess Cathleen*. Lady Gregory's support, in the form of a "first guarantee of £25," was swiftly followed up by a joint statement, promising the writing and production of "certain Celtic and Irish plays," the identification within Ireland of "an uncorrupted and imaginative audience," and a freedom of experimentation that would avoid troublesome political questions.

A list of those who came forward with sufficient money to make possible the maturing of Yeats's visionary plans for the Irish Literary Theatre was recorded in Lennox Robinson's official history of the Abbey Theatre. George Moore's description of how he organized and directed rehearsals, wittily written but doubtless misleading in its distribution of credits, may be found in *Hail and Farewell*. Yeats, thinking about the whole experience later, wrote *Dramatis Personae* (1935-1936) from the point of view of a more skeptical and detached observer than he actually was at the time. Indeed, the story of the Abbey's early years has been told well enough, and often enough, by the major participants. The crucial decision about what would happen to the Irish Literary Theatre had to be made toward the end of the third year, when the awkwardnesses inherent in transporting English actors to Dublin for special performances became serious threats to any continuity of tradition; when a choice had to be made about the nature of the stock company that would have to be trained. Yeats, attracted to the talents of Frank and William Fay, was more responsible than anyone else for creating the Irish National Dramatic Company, which became the Irish National Theatre Society shortly after Lady Gregory agreed to work with it (George Moore and Edward Martyn refusing to continue past this point). The first productions took place in April, 1902.

Yeats would not have written as much as he did for the stage if Lady Gregory's encouragement had not made the theatre an exciting possibility. Moreover, the consequences of her intervention in 1897 (a year earlier than the date she cites in *Our Irish Theatre*)<sup>5</sup> have not always been appreciated: the improvement of Yeats's sense of what was possible in poetic diction, the opportunity to work closely with John

Millington Synge, and later with Sean O'Casey, the exploration of older dramatic forms and the enlargement of acquaintance with other dramatic traditions, the development of attitudes toward acting, dancing, and music within the theatre.

Even so, Lady Gregory's role must not be exaggerated. The playlets of the 1880's, Yeats's admiration of John Todhunter's productions, his delight at the reception of *The Land of Heart's Desire*,<sup>6</sup> the stage history of *The Countess Cathleen* (1889), and the intense work that went into *The Shadowy Waters* for more than two decades, beginning approximately in 1885, indicate that Yeats was paying close attention to the possibility that he himself might some day contribute significantly to dramatic literature. Although the first decade of the twentieth century was wholly dedicated to what Yeats, in "The Cutting of an Agate," called the "single art" "of a small, unpopular theatre," and Yeats's views on dramatic technique were refined for publication in the occasional newsletters *Samhain* (1901-1905) and *The Arrow* (1906-1907), Yeats had been thinking about what was wrong with the Victorian stage long before the end of the century.

Reviewing William Allingham's *Irish Songs and Poems* (1887) for the *Providence Sunday Journal* of July 26, 1891, Yeats wondered why, "with all our education and respect for literature," neither the English nor the Irish had any modern poetic drama. "We still go to see Shakespeare, but then we have made him one of our superstitions. When any adventurous person puts verse upon the stage, the theatre-goer—if the verse be worth anything and not mere prose cut into lengths—begins to yawn and say it is all very pretty, but it is not dramatic. It is the poet's fault, he insists, that he does not like the play."<sup>7</sup>

In a piquant preface to T. Fisher Unwin's edition of *The Countess Cathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (London, 1892), Yeats wrote that he had attempted "to mingle personal thought and feeling with the beliefs and customs of Christian Ireland," while *The Wanderings of Oisín*, an earlier work, had "endeavoured to set forth the impress left on my imagination by the Pre-Christian cycle of legends. The Christian cycle being mainly concerned with contending moods and moral motives needed, I thought, a dramatic vehicle. The tumultuous

and heroic Pagan cycle, on the other hand, having to do with vast and shadowy activities and with the great impersonal emotions, expressed itself naturally—or so I imagined—in epic and epic-lyric measures. No epic method seemed sufficiently minute and subtle for the one, and no dramatic method elastic and all-containing enough for the other.”<sup>8</sup> Such statements prefigured later disenchantment with the ability of Celtic Twilight poetry to be precise or personal enough.

By early January, 1897, Yeats was writing to “Fiona Macleod” that his own “theory” of poetic drama could not allow either realistic or elaborate settings; that symbolic backdrops “would have the further advantage of being fairly cheap, and altogether novel”; that the acting should be stylized; and that the plays “might be, almost, in some cases, modern mystery plays.”<sup>9</sup> If anything, the passage of time reinforced his conviction that plays could deal with Irish subjects, reflect Irish ideas and sentiments, and “furnish a vehicle for the literary expression of the national thought and ideals of Ireland such as has not hitherto been in existence,” without being trapped by the conditions governing the production of plays “on the regular stage,” without being forced to aim at an “immediate commercial success,”<sup>10</sup> without compromising what he called, in a letter to the *Daily Chronicle* of January 27, 1899, “an imaginative glory.”<sup>11</sup> Discovering his anti-Theatre-of-Commerce theme, he gave to its expression the same impassioned treatment that had made his conversion to Irishry so interesting to his friends.

When he began his work with the Irish Literary Theatre, he hoped for an achievement in Dublin that might parallel “something of what has been done in London and Paris.” In the first of three issues of *Beltaine* (May, 1899), Yeats, writing under the heading “Plans and Methods,” announced the intention of the Theatre to produce, approximately at the time of the Celtic May Day Festival, a play based upon an Irish subject, and added that “the intellect of Ireland is romantic and spiritual rather than scientific and analytical. . . .” He added, lest anyone mistake the sincerity of the name of the organization, “In all or almost all cases the plays must be published before they are acted, and no play will be produced which could not hope to succeed as a book.” He thought it vital to the intentions of the group that actors learn how

to speak *words*, even though precise elocution had become a lost art; yet he saw some hope in the simple quietness with which the lines of *The Heather Field* were spoken, and the awareness by the players that *The Countess Cathleen* demanded some rhythmical intonation.

By the second issue (February, 1900) his confidence had risen: "Prophecies are generally unfortunate, and I made some last year that have not come true; but I think I may say that we will have no difficulty in getting good plays for next year. Mr. Martyn has finished a new play, Mr. Bernard Shaw promises us a play which he describes as an Irish Rogue's Comedy, and Mr. George Moore and myself are half through a three-act play in prose on the legend of Dermot and Grania. . . . We have decided to have a play in Irish if we can get it." In an article on the doings of the Irish Literary Theatre, originally published in *The Dome* (January, 1900) and reprinted in the second issue of *Beltaine*, he went further than ever before: "Scandinavia is, as it seems, passing from her moments of miracle; and some of us think that Ireland is passing to hers."

Here, by early 1900, were the major tenets of Yeats's views on what drama should be. Yeats had already quarreled with William Archer and George Moore about the importance of scenery and costumes; stated his preference for a theatre of "moral and spiritual truths" to one of entertainment and prosperity; turned his back on the general public in favor of a small audience that preferred, in its dreams, to "remember the enchanted valleys" and refused to contemplate "prosaic things and ignoble things"; firmly supported the creation of a dramatic literature that would retain merit in the study; and wondered if it might not be possible to re-train actors and actresses to give life to such a literature when presented on the stage, with some emphasis on naturalness, and some on the relationship of music to speech. It was all designed, of course, to restore to his former prominence the Poet, who had begun his efforts for the stage with the chanted ode, with language that delighted the ear. These were the fragments of an extraordinary manifesto, no less remarkable because it appeared in bits and pieces, in letters and in jottings accompanying playbills, in notations attached to longer journalistic pieces that have never been reprinted.

The rest of this chapter concentrates on three plays that Yeats wrote, and rewrote, during this decade: *The Land of Heart's Desire*, *The Shadowy Waters*, and *The Countess Cathleen*. The act of composition, and the labors involved in staging each play, made more real to Yeats the dangers implicit in any inadequately formulated manifesto. The record was by no means one of complete triumph: *The Shadowy Waters*, for instance, was a morass of inconsistent or tentative intellectualizations, and *The Countess Cathleen*, despite the popular acclaim which greeted its original form, changed strikingly from year to year as Yeats changed his mind about what he wanted to accomplish. But any study of Yeats's work with these three dramas may well conclude that Yeats, for a major part of his career, was more a dramatist with lyrical impulses than a lyrical poet with an interest in drama.

*The Land of Heart's Desire*, first of Yeats's plays to be staged, was part of the Celtic Twilight period. Written, in large measure, to provide a part for Dorothy Paget, the niece of Florence Farr (at whose theatre the play was staged), and dedicated to Miss Farr, the action of the play took place in "a vague, mysterious world." It is tempting to read into the single incident—the seduction by "a faery child" of Maire Bruin, who has grown weary of conventional wisdom and the dull world—Yeats's commentary on Maud Gonne's dissatisfaction with the role for which her beauty and social station had ordained her. Unable to accept the fact that political concepts were for Maud more than the call of a siren, were indeed a way of life she had willingly embraced, Yeats, on many occasions during the 1890's, scolded what he called personal irresponsibility.

Reading the play as thinly disguised autobiography, however, reduces the value of the play. Yeats was writing here about an Irish world, one that, like the theatre of Scandinavia between 1840 and 1860, had been founded upon old legends, folk songs, and folk traditions. As Edmund Gosse, serving as chairman of the Irish Literary Society, pointed out, the cosmopolitan, commercial play had been the foundation of Ibsen's success, and of the Scandinavian theatre; but, like a large number of Yeats's friends, he shared a desire to call back "a cosmopolitan and denationalised class" from a "base sense of animalism and



commercialism to what was noble and dignified in the art of drama."<sup>12</sup> Vague though the locale might have been, it was identified as the Barony of Kilmacowen, in the County of Sligo; it contained references to a Spaniard who had been shipwrecked at Ocris Head (Aughris Head in Sligo Bay), the legend of Princess Edain, the naturalness of dreaming upon May Eve about the Good People (the Tuatha de Danaan), the superstition of hanging a "branch of blessed quicken wood" upon a doorpost for good luck, the singing of a reed of Coolaney, the eagle-cock "that blinks and blinks on Ballygawley Hill," "white-armed Nuala," "Aengus of the Birds," and Finvara, "ruler of the Western Host," who dwelled in the Land of Heart's Desire.

Some Irishmen resented Yeats's portrayal of Father Hart, and Yeats's portrayals of Catholic priests, though never as offensive as Synge's, were always colored by his willingness to dramatize religious attitudes. Those who gathered behind Father Hart for protection against "this mighty spirit" placed their trust in a feeble bulwark, as revealed by his action in volunteering to remove the crucifix from the wall:

Because you are so young and like a bird,  
That must take fright at every stir of the leaves,  
I will go take it down.

This gesture of conciliation made the Child all-powerful, and the invocations of Christian saints could not triumph over the attraction of promises of a land where "joy is wisdom" and time "an endless song." Father Hart's final speech acknowledged his helplessness before the spirits of evil, whose power, "day by day," grew "more and more." (At least one reviewer attacked it as "a revolting burlesque of Irish Catholic religion."<sup>13</sup>)

The play earned its right to be treated as dramatic literature. One critic noted that Yeats's plots, "with minor exceptions," focus on "single, highly unified situations, from which he has shorn away every irrelevant detail, even dissociating them, to a marked degree, from contingent antecedent and off-stage action."<sup>14</sup> Even Eric Bentley, who deplored Yeats's fascination with the literary language of the nineteenth century, "the feeblest language in all modern literature," and who suspected that

blank verse had long since exhausted its dramatic possibilities, agreed with Ronald Peacock that Yeats was a classic dramatist who had cut everything away from the dramatic situation: there exists in each play "a single knot, a rather loose one, which is untied in a single movement."<sup>15</sup>

Yeats eliminated all superfluous details from his study of conflicting attitudes toward the world of responsibilities: pot-cleaning, kettle-minding, cow-milking, and table-setting on the one hand, and wind-riding, running on waves, and mountain-dancing on the other. Each character benefited from the tight, coherent shaping that Yeats provided; even in his first play intended for stage presentation, he was thinking about the contribution that form, the way in which drama moved to its resolution, made to the theatre. *The Land of Heart's Desire* was organically whole; it said what the theme demanded; it avoided the byroads of Irish eloquence; and it concluded. Yeats's growing dissatisfaction with the language of the play and his reference to it in later years as "a vague sentimental trifle" should not obscure its mastery of structure.

More than any single factor the structural deficiencies of *The Shadowy Waters* led to its long, depressing history of rewrites, extending from approximately 1884 to the acting versions of 1907. George Moore and Edward Martyn were dismayed by the heaviness of the symbolic cargo; the story itself, Moore wrote, was difficult to discover in the "knotted" and "entangled" skein. AE believed that one version had been completed when Yeats was nineteen or twenty; in 1894 Yeats was complaining to his father that he was doing "nothing" except this play (doubtless a new version);<sup>16</sup> but the version ready for publication in 1896 did not get into print, at least partly because of the untimely death of Aubrey Beardsley, who had promised to provide illustrations; Yeats rewrote the play completely; and no complete draft of the play prior to its first printing (in the *North American Review*, May, 1900) survives.<sup>17</sup>

It is, however, possible to judge the achievement of Yeats's final version in terms of those portions of the early manuscripts that have survived. The prose draft which incorporated the changes suggested by

George Moore (described in Moore's *Ave*) "seems to be the plan which Yeats followed in writing the 1900 version."<sup>18</sup> Yeats may never have finished the play, though he had its ending in mind, and discussed it with friends. In his introduction to the best version that he could synthesize from the original pages—many of which Yeats discarded before 1900—David R. Clark has written, "Trying to establish the order of the early manuscripts of *The Shadowy Waters* was like going back to a genesis such as that described by Jacob Boehme where the dark mirroring Ungrund, the primal Will, broods itself into Heart and Spirit, into Triune Being."<sup>19</sup>

Yet these fragments, despite George Moore's alarm and Edward Martyn's confusion, made their dramatic point. Yeats was seeking to demonstrate that the Fomorians, the gods of darkness, had to be defeated in a ceaseless round of battles; their original defeat, on the strands of Moytura near Sligo, which had led to the creation of the habitable world, did not crush their hungers or their aspirations for doing evil. Yeats created the Seabar, complete with an eagle's head, to speak for the Fomorians, who were old before "the pillars of the heavens were set up."<sup>20</sup> The Fomorians were powerless in the presence of "hearts that have known love," and must retreat before them; but their own "proud, insatiate hearts [were] not appeased." Forgael's quest through the shadowy waters was for a love he had not yet known; but his wizardry, though "mightier than the moon and sun," was circumscribed; his life tumbled in mortal danger before the onslaught of the Fomorians. Whether Forgael killed himself, or fell hapless before the Fomor (Yeats considered both possibilities), his death constituted a sacrifice for the sake of Dectora, the princess whom he had abducted from a ship, and whose love, Aleel, he had slain. Pity, desire, ultimately love, purified his mind. When the White Seabar appeared to prevent the Fomorians from flinging themselves upon Forgael's body, he was white because of Forgael's noble gesture; predatory like the rest, but crowned with silver; and now his beak would have to tear his "own heart alone."

Yeats evidently intended to suggest that Forgael's discovery of love had, at least temporarily, defeated the powers of darkness. The fact that

the Fomorians survived after Forgael's self-immolation suggests how eternal they are; nor had their nature changed since their original defeat on the Towery Plain. As much of Yeats's later work made clear, he believed that each generation had its own battle to fight and its own discoveries to make.

The other play of this decade was *The Countess Cathleen*, a story which fascinated Yeats to the extent that he began to write it early in 1889, and was excited enough by March 8 of that year to refer to it as "my most interesting poem and in all ways quite dramatic. . . . It is in five scenes and full of action and very Irish."<sup>21</sup> Yeats's tinkering with the text were not confined to the major revisions of 1895, 1901, 1912, and 1919: "the record of revision, extending over nearly thirty years, is lengthier than that of *The Shadowy Waters* or of any other play by Yeats."<sup>22</sup> Yeats was learning that structure was only one element of a play, and that he should become concerned over the problem of how to involve dramatic creations significantly in the moments of time that he had chosen for them. The measure of their significant involvement was turning out to be the appeal that he simultaneously made to his audience's sense of conduct and sense of beauty.

It has been argued that all Yeats's plays were a quest for Beauty, "Beauty like a tightened bow," and that all had "the quality of dream rather than reality of everyday."<sup>23</sup> Lionel Johnson believed that Yeats "wrote for the stage rather from a desire to have his verses spoken than from a strong bent for the drama."<sup>24</sup> But Richard Ellmann's position, that Yeats equivocated between formal and realistic drama in the earlier plays, and did too much theorizing in his middle period, is more moderate, and more convincing on that account. ". . . In spite of his principle of common language and common passion, his personages are close to arrangements and abstractions and even in tragic circumstances do not assume altogether human life. Something seems to be wrong with their breathing. . . ."<sup>25</sup> Ellmann adds that the use of masks enabled Yeats "to achieve enough distance from life so that his characters would not demand so pressingly as in the Irish legends to be entirely human."

The first version of the story which was to occupy Yeats's imagi-

nation for more than a third of his life was recorded in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (London, 1888), where it stood as one of four tales about the Devil. Its brisk, colloquial prose marched at the same pace as *John Sherman*, on which Yeats was simultaneously working, and need not be ascribed to its immediate source, "an Irish newspaper" which had caught Yeats's eye. (Later Yeats was to learn that the true source, *Les Matinées de Timothée Trimm*, by Léo Lespès, did not go very far back in time, but he never changed his mind about its "essential antiquity," or his view that it expressed "one of the supreme parables of the world.") In Yeats's original adaptation, the Countess Kathleen O'Shea, having signed "a parchment sealed with black" to save the peasantry, shut herself up in a room and died: "But the sale of this soul, so adorable in its charity, was declared null by the Lord; for she had saved her fellow-citizens from eternal death."

The version which Yeats published in the Cameo Series of T. Fisher Unwin was prefaced by a quotation from Paracelsus ab Hohenheim: "He who tastes a crust of bread tastes all the stars and all the heavens." Its dedication to Maud Gonne noted that at her suggestion he had "planned out and begun" the play "some three years ago," and, in the Preface, Yeats indicated the importance of his venture by linking it with *The Wanderings of Oisín* as "an attempt to unite a more ample method to feeling not less national, Celtic, and distinctive," and by describing it on the title page as "An Irish Drama."

The play, of course, was not historical, despite the setting of the scene as "Ireland in the Sixteenth Century." Its drama arose from the failure of Irishmen to act for the common good; they desired only to end the hunger that assailed them, and they were willing to sell their souls if necessary. Shemus Rua, in whose inn, "The Lady's Head," much of the action took place, had endured great provocations. Before him stretched the prospect of living on dock and nettles until his mouth, like that of his neighbor, Margaret Nolan, turned green. He had no faith in the shrine to which his wife prayed, and argued that "God and God's mother nod and sleep. . . ." He felt he was suffering a great wrong, and, childlike, he went further, believing that the famine had been directed against him personally.

His son, Teig, aged fourteen, acted in concert with his embittered father. He had no sense of pity for his mother, who saw so clearly the duty she owed to God (her prayer to the Virgin indicated that she knew her husband was in danger "from the demons of the woods" who preyed upon "those alive who have gone crazed with famine"), and he was impressed by the emissaries of the Devil as "great gentlemen," who "must have seen rare sights and done rare things." (In later versions Yeats expanded on Teig's quick-witted amorality, his failure to comprehend the nobility of the character of the Countess Cathleen, and his anxiety to persuade the peasants to sell their souls to the Merchants.)

Mary, wife of Shemus Rua, got nowhere in her entreaties to him, but she immediately recognized the diabolism of the Merchants, and refused to cook for them. She urged them, if they were not demons, to give "alms among the starving poor." She never confessed to fear in their presence, and, calling them "destroyers of souls," added bravely,

You shall at last dry like dry leaves, and hang  
Nailed like dead vermin to the doors of God.

No matter what they said, she knew that God was all-powerful, and she stood for the same kind of incorruptibility that called the Countess Cathleen to Heaven.

The peasants of Scene IV were troubled people, urged beyond what they conceived to be their limits of endurance. Yeats did not sentimentalize them. John Maher turned out to be

a man of substance, with dull mind,  
And quiet senses and unventurous heart.  
The angels think him safe.

When he attempted to haggle with the merchants, the flaw in his character stood revealed:

. . . often at night  
He's wakeful from a dread of growing poor.

The peasants came to the merchants for various reasons: money, fear of the grave, a desire to imitate their neighbors, and even a delight in being able to take a decision, at the cost of all hope.

Despite its closeness of observation in both character and idiom (and Yeats annotated the dialogue to prove that he had read his sources with care), the play was primarily concerned with moral and spiritual realities. The fact that peasants would not live by the light of the intense flame of conviction warming the heart of their benefactress was never out of Yeats's mind, despite the redemption which her death provided for them no less than for herself. Yet not for a moment do playgoers believe that the Countess Cathleen's faith went unrewarded. After the demons had stolen her gold, an old man's lamentation that God had forsaken the Irish people was met with gentle firmness by the Countess:

Old man, old man, He never closed a door  
Unless one opened.

She retained her faith. God, as she understood him, modeled in the clay and molded there His image. To create beauty was difficult in a world that knew the demon; even the hand of God might slip, and "demon hordes" might be born. Nevertheless, faith could, and would, and must triumph over the worst that both life on earth and the demons had to present. When the sad resolve woke in her—to sell her soul and thus end the "sound of wailing in unnumbered hovels"—she urged the peasants to pray for all their "good neighbours." The peasants kneeled, and she cried in a loud voice,

Mary, queen of angels,  
And all you clouds on clouds of saints, farewell.

At that moment she renounced spiritual salvation for the sake of humanity.

Such a soul was worth a great price to the Merchants. They willingly paid the five hundred thousand crowns which she demanded, a sum which would feed her people "till the dearth go by." All recognized the importance of her sacrifice. The Second Merchant offered her for the signing of the damnable contract a quill made of a feather "growing on the cock / That crowed when Peter had denied his Master. . . ." Kevin, the poet who attempted to prevent her signing by snatching the parchment from her, promised her yet "the love of some

great chief," the vision of "children gathering round [her] knees"; but she would not be turned back, not even when he promised for her the prospect of "archangels rolling over the high mountains Old Satan's empty skull." She thereby renounced her "longing for a deeper peace / Than Fergus found amid his brazen cars," her hope (expressed to Oona in an earlier scene) that she "could go down and dwell among the Shee / In their old ever-busy honeyed land." The Gardener, the Herdsman, the peasants in all their famine-stricken need, had made impossible a retreat from the world, and from her responsibilities for decision. What Oisín refused to accept, she willingly claimed; and in descending from her exalted station to mingle with clay, she rose to her transfiguration.<sup>26</sup>

Her death inspired the peasants to cry a chorus of the saved, to offer testament that they no longer thought of themselves, and that they now understood the nature of the sacrifice. As "a row of spirits" carried her lifeless body in their slow descent from the oratory, Oona, her foster-mother, cried out,

My hour has come, oh blessed queen of heaven,  
I am to die, for I have seen a vision.

All were overwhelmed with grief. One peasant wrung his hands: "O, she was the white lily of the world." Another announced that "never shall another be so good." A third peasant declared that "she was more beautiful than the great stars." They were transformed: *ideals which were lived by, loved, and sacrificed for, would resurrect the race.*

Despair was unjustified. The devil contemplated only the deed, but because she gave away her soul for others, God saw the motive as more important than the dead. Oona, in the last speech of the play, desired only to die and go to the Countess.

Such a play, even in its 1892 version,<sup>27</sup> delineated character in economical and telling fashion, and treated a theme of some magnitude. It satisfied both the imagination and the intellect, which, in Yeats's phrase, cried out against the temporal and perishing.

As a beginning dramatist, then, Yeats succeeded to a remarkable degree, and his plays were more than matrices for the poems. *The*



*Countess Cathleen*, among the earliest of the twenty-six plays that he wrote during a crowded career devoted to many other activities, was enough to make an audience catch its breath in admiration.

## IX: *The Wind Among the Reeds*

With the publication of *The Wind Among the Reeds* in April, 1899, William Butler Yeats came simultaneously to the end of the century and to the final moment of a crowded, exhilarating time-period of fifteen years. One should not stress unduly the discontinuity between phases of Yeats's career, for a willingness to experiment with the new always lay behind reworkings of old themes and poems that had already achieved some popularity in printed form. There was, in brief, no "old" Yeats and no "new" Yeats in any save the most general sense. One may re-read, with fascination, statements made in the 1890's that expressed dissatisfaction with the turn that modern poetry was taking, and, at the other end (the 1930's), identify Pre-Raphaelite elements in Yeats's poetry.

But in the 108 pages of text and the 37 poems of *The Wind Among the Reeds* Yeats did indeed look backward more often than ahead. In a letter written, in all likelihood, to M. Henry D. Davray, a French reviewer and translator of some of Yeats's writings, Yeats explained why he had written such lengthy notes, "really elaborate essays in the manner of *The Celtic Twilight*."<sup>1</sup> They had, after all, cost him much time and energy, and rendered him vulnerable to the charge that he had written "very long notes about very short poems." But he believed that some readers would forgive him the poems "for the sake of the valuable information in the notes." For A. H. Bullen's edition of the *Collected Works* (1908), Yeats was to confess that he had put into the notes "all the little learning" he had, and "more wilful phantasy" than he thought admirable, "though what [was] most mystical" still seemed to him "the most true." Again Yeats defined such matters as the *Tuatha De Danaan* (the Sidhe), The Host of the Air, the Fomorians, and the ancient Tree of Life; retold tales that were somehow related to Arthurian legends, prophecies chanted all over Ireland, and the legends recorded by Rhys and Frazer; and alluded to what earlier Irish poets like Mangan had done with the rich symbols of Ireland's past.

The poems, all written during the 1890's and published piecemeal in the *Bookman*, the *Savoy*, the *Saturday Review*, and various periodicals, remained relatively untouched in subsequent reprintings once

this volume appeared.<sup>2</sup> *The Wind Among the Reeds* was noteworthy, among other reasons, for the effect Yeats made to sort out his separate selves, to identify the aspects of his personality which had become distinct one from the other. Three aspects in particular (Yeats identified them as more "principles of the mind" than "actual personages") seemed crucial to him, although he did not successfully make them independent of each other.

Aedh, to whom the largest number of poems was assigned, was "the Irish for fire . . . fire burning by itself . . . the myrrh and frankincense that the imagination offers continually before all that it loves." When Aedh told of the Rose in his heart, he spoke of love that was immediate, of "the wrong of unshapely things" that tormented him. When he lamented the loss of love, it was as if she had just left: "She has gone weeping away." His beloved had only to "lift a pearl-pale hand" for all men's hearts to "burn and beat." He wandered by the edge of a "desolate lake" and heard wind crying in the sedge. He denied the right of others to speak evil of his beloved. Even while wishing his beloved dead, the sense of her immediacy and warmth was overpowering. A poor man who possessed only dreams, he could ask her to "tread softly" because she trod on his dreams; he wished in vain for the Cloths of Heaven.

Less often present, but no less important because Yeats consistently saw a relationship between fire and the imagination, was Michael Robartes, "fire reflected in water . . . the pride of the imagination brooding upon the greatness of its possessions, or the adoration of the Magi. . . ." Bidding his Beloved to be at peace, Michael Robartes spoke of passion that somehow was caught in slow motion, that had no freedom (the image of fire on water was trapped by the water, and somehow moved below the surface of the water): "The Horses of Disaster plunge in the heavy clay. . . ." Michael Robartes remembered "Forgotten Beauty," and compared the loveliness of the woman he embraced to "the jewelled crowns" that kings, fleeing with their armies from the battlefields, had flung into "shadowy pools."<sup>8</sup> For Robartes the world was "dream-heavy," and when white Beauty sighed, remembering the sure knell of mortality ("hours when all must fade like dew"), the

"flame on flame" was seen in conjunction with "deep on deep." The "high lonely mysteries" of Beauty sat on thrones with "their swords upon their iron knees," but they brooded; theirs was a "half sleep," they would not rise to action. In the third and last of Michael Robartes' poems, where he asked forgiveness because he had been moody and his heart "importunate," he imagined that his Beloved might want to speak of his "Hearts" as being "wind-blown flame." Some might talk of "battle-banners fold upon purple fold," but in "the odorous twilight" the lover imagined how his beloved sighed "for all things longing for rest."

Hanrahan, third of the characters or personages borrowed from *The Secret Rose*, was "fire blown by the wind . . . the simplicity of an imagination too changeable to gather permanent possessions, or the adoration of the shepherds. . . ." To him Yeats assigned three poems, each of which described the imaginative faculty besieged by a special kind of image. When Hanrahan reproved the curlew for reminding him of "passion-dimmed eyes," or of "long heavy hair" once shaken out over his breast, it was the sound of crying that he could not stand: "There is enough evil in the crying of wind." When he lamented his wanderings, he knew that he could never enjoy "our Mother of Peace"; the winds that had "awakened the stars" now blew through his blood, and she had forgotten him "under her purple hood." And when he spoke to the Lovers of his Songs in Coming Days, the vocabulary was religious: he trusted that "Maurya of the wounded heart" (the Attorney for Lost Souls" in later versions) would take pity on "the great sin" he was weaving into song, and would urge him to fly no longer "amid the hovering, piteous, penitential throng."

Aedh, Robartes, and Hanrahan were arbitrary categories that would have become more distinct if Yeats had been able to construct a genuine colloquy: more than the self existed in any significant drama of relationships, and Yeats was to find more direct ways of writing drama in the decade that followed the publication of *The Wind Among the Reeds*. Indeed, he soon became dissatisfied with this assignment of poems to imperfectly realized principles of the mind, and later reprintings omitted the names of the speakers.<sup>4</sup> It is, at any rate, misleading

to say that the appearance of this book marks "the end of Yeats's apprenticeship as a symbolist, though it may not be very successful in itself,"<sup>5</sup> for the synthesis of Yeats's cultural materials was by no means complete at the end of the century.

The rapidly accelerating change in attitude toward technique and subject-matter—a change more closely related to the work with playwrights and actors than to his verse-writing contemporaries in both England and Ireland—seems reasonably well datable in terms of *The Wind Among the Reeds*. Definite changes took place between 1899 and 1903, when *In the Seven Woods* appeared: use of the shorter octosyllabic line rather than standard pentameter; the placing of stress on significant words rather than observing the regularity of the metronome; the pruning-away of literary archaisms and an increased taste for colloquial language.<sup>6</sup> For something like forty years now those who dislike Yeats's "flimsy stuff of faery Celtic twilight" often concentrate their attack on *The Wind Among the Reeds*, and cite poems written during the next decade, perhaps even as early as *In the Seven Woods*, as the first examples of his "daring new style." It seems clear that Yeats was publishing in 1899 poems illustrating a literary style, and an attitude of mind, with which he was comfortable.

The book's contents did not surprise the poetry-reading public of of late 1890's. A reviewer for the *Critic* spoke with warm admiration of Yeats, "always a poet, whether his medium be measure and rhyme or limpid prose annotating the ancient legend on which he builds his house of vision."<sup>7</sup> Another critic, announcing that the *Academy* was awarding twenty-five guineas to Yeats for having written the best book of poetry in 1899, declared that, as poet, Yeats suggested "nothing outside poetry—the simple essence; not poetic embodiment of this thing or that, but just poetry."<sup>8</sup> This view granted Yeats the right to the imaginative world he had claimed for himself, did not look closely at the sources or even (most of the time) the verbal nuances of the poems. Its enjoyment was of Yeats's music.

It was a music which alluded often enough to the art of music. The fiddler of Dooney, brother to two priests, one in Kilvarnet and the other

in Moharabuicee, was sure that he rather than they would be the first to pass through St. Peter's gate:

For the good are always the merry,  
Save by an evil chance,  
And the merry love the fiddle  
And the merry love to dance. . . .

In heaven, as on earth, he would be welcomed for the music his instrument could create; the folk would rejoice, "and dance like a wave of the sea." The angelic door in "The Travail of Passion," a poem which minimized "the scourge" and "the plaited thorns" for the sake of "an immortal passion" and for "roses of passionate dream," was "flaming" and "lute-throned." And an extraordinary poem, "The Cap and Bells," described how a young queen, entranced by the gifts of a jester who has died for love of her, sang to them, with red lips,

a love song:  
Till stars grew out of the air.

When wandering Aengus speaks of his hope some day to

pluck till time and times are done,  
The silver apples of the moon,  
The golden apples of the sun,

an image of "a state of blessedness," his song, like that of so many other singers in the volume, delighted in its own life. Even the old mother, who worked because she was old "and the seed of the fire [got] feeble and cold," thought with passionate vividness of the idle young lying long, dreaming in their bed "of the matching of ribbons for bosom and head." Yeats labeled her soliloquy as *song*.

The sweetness of the melody, then, was not posited against a world of reality; it became the only enduring reality. Niamh's voice calling, "Away, come away," had more substance than the "mortal dream" it warned the listener to deny. If, in another poem, the tempting Voices were urged to "be still," because "our hearts are old," their sweetness had an ancient heritage; they were "the everlasting Voices." Our music on earth was the pale, enervated imitation of a divine song, which

perhaps only the blessed, and certainly only a few, might overhear: such was the theme of "The Host of the Air," in which O'Driscoll's singing as he drove "the wild duck and the drake" from the reeds "of the drear Hart Lake," was less powerful in its magic than the piping, "high up in the air," of a greater musician:

And never was piping so sad,  
And never was piping so gay.

Aedh pleaded with the elemental powers ("falling wave and wind and windy fire") to encircle the one he loved with their "harmonious choir" and to "sing her into peace":

. . . let a gentle silence wrought with music flow  
Whither her footsteps go.

The word "song" occurs more than 140 times in Yeats's poems.<sup>9</sup>

Joy—in the very sense that Matthew Arnold had used the word when he characterized the best poems of Wordsworth—dominated the poems of this Celtic world. The poem "Into the Twilight" urged the "out-worn heart, in a time out-worn," to "come clear of the nets of wrong and right" and to "laugh . . . again in the gray twilight." Understanding that hope fell from the heart, that love decayed, that "the dew of the morn" would lead to sighs, Yeats exulted,

Your mother Eire is always young. . . .

He brought to his beloved the books of his "numberless dreams," his "passionate rhyme." Aedh worried about "all things uncomely and broken" because they wronged the image of his beloved blossoming as a rose in his heart; he would have liked

to build them anew and sit on a green knoll apart,  
With the earth and the sky and the water, remade. . . .

In still another poem, Aedh spoke of the hard work he had experienced in writing his "poor rhymes,"

Building a sorrowful loveliness  
Out of the battles of old times. . . .

"Loveliness"—the sense that something might yet be salvaged from the greyness of disappointed love, that the poet might some day experience an hour of a "great wind of love and hate," that he might join "the proud, majestic multitude" if only he could conquer fear of "the flame and the flood"—was stressed far more often than the crying curlew, the emotions tainted by loneliness, and the poet's sorrow that so much beauty had proved impermanent.



## X: Conclusion

The arguments over whether Yeats improved or weakened his poems by making the revisions that ended only in 1956 with the printing of the Definitive Edition<sup>1</sup> tend to disregard one important fact. Readings of the early and late versions of a given poem constitute essentially different experiences. It is, moreover, very difficult to return with an innocent eye to the values of the original version once one has become familiar with the structure and diction of the final "poem." What Joseph Warren Beach wrote about the revising practice of W. H. Auden has pertinence here: "... the poet, with the best of intentions, is virtually misrepresenting the thought which actually informed the earlier writings."<sup>2</sup> Yeats certainly possessed the wholeness, or "integrality," that Beach thought Auden lacked; but Yeats, like Auden, raised the very real question of *identity*. For this reason recent surveys of Yeats's career have noted the inadequacy of treatments of the crucial period in his life that this study has been considering.<sup>3</sup>

Why, indeed, was Yeats's slim volume *The Wind Among the Reeds* considered quintessential poetry by the reviewers? They enjoyed what later readers, and Yeats himself, learned to distrust: the soft, yielding images ("the hyssop-heavy sponge," "The West weeps in pale dew and sighs passing away," "Time drops in decay"); the long vowels that feminized the masculine rhymes; the exotic names that no amount of scholarship could make precise ("Clooth-na-bare," "the Polar Dragon," "the Country of the Young"); the love of nature that ignored industrial ugliness; the attractive sincerity of a lyric voice that rejoiced in its song ("I made it out of a mouthful of air. . ."); and the indomitable Irishry of it all. These dreamers, caught up in a Celtic phantasmagoria, did not walk on solid ground, did not bleed real blood, did not call for or need our sympathy; they were not human; the poet's only commitment was—if we may borrow a line from "Aedh Tells of the Perfect Beauty"—"to build a perfect beauty in rhyme. . . ."

Yeats had perfected both his matter and his manner. Doing safely, and again, what he had proved he could do intimitably well seemed inevitable. But Yeats knew better than most of his fellow-poets that the 1890's were ending, and that if he were to continue to grow as an artist,

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he would have to enter into new and perhaps exacerbating relationships with dramatic collaborators, journalists, and publishers. He did not hesitate. No sensible man could accuse Yeats of being afraid to take risks merely for the sake of holding on to a reputation; and, as he wrote in 1897, "I am feeling more and more every day that our Celtic movement is approaching a new phase."<sup>4</sup>

Any plea for the reconsideration of the work written between 1885 and 1900 must admit the justice of Yeats's admission to Robert Bridges, late in the century, that "one has to give something of one's self to the devil that one may live."<sup>5</sup> A dismayingly large proportion of journalism and commercial writing was mixed with what is worthy to endure. But altogether it was a creditable record, made by a poet whose very failures were more exciting than many another poet's successes. When the original texts are reviewed one by one, as they came out year by year, some sense of the excitement, the fun, of the younger Yeats is bound to communicate itself to the reader; of the indomitable Yeats who, depressed by Irish stupidity, could still write to Katharine Tynan: "... if the sun shines in the morning I shall be full of delight and of battle and ready to draw my bow against the dragon."<sup>6</sup>

Because Yeats went on to the great poems of his final quarter-century, his critics have concentrated on them at the expense of practically all the work written during these fifteen intensely active years. To some extent Yeats encouraged them to neglect his early period: he saved for the Definitive Edition only 76 poems, most of them quite brief, and *The Wanderings of Oisín*, of all that he had written between 1885 and 1900.

I hope that this review suggests the value of reconsidering some standard attitudes. For example, Yeats, who could not make a living from the vocation of poet, wrote an impressive quantity of prose, and there were long stretches of time when he wrote very little poetry at all. Yeats as a literary critic, a prose stylist, and as a story-teller has hardly been treated in Yeats criticism.

Also, the extent of Yeats's concern with dialogue and with the forms of drama needs to be better understood. His exotic playlets were not trivial to him. He did not become fascinated by drama late in the

1890's. Lady Gregory's largesse did not inspire him to write plays for the first time. And his achievement can be measured in terms of the major types that he created before the end of the century: the poet-dreamer, unfitted for a world of power and political realities; the woman saint, sanctified by visions and destined—despite the devil's temptations—to achieve God's grace; and the Celtic king baffled by the harsh dogma of Christian priests.

The quality of Yeats's scholarship must also be respected. In part we need to know how much the Irish, during the 1880's and 1890's, knew of their own mythology and history. The Irish themselves do not know because their historiography, until very recently, has been in such a shocking state of neglect. The evidence summarized by this monograph suggests that Yeats knew as much as most of his contemporaries about the best sources for a review of the usable past. His friendship with Douglas Hyde, his research in various libraries as well as in the ephemeral literature that escaped the attention of librarians, and his developing sense of what his Irishry could become, were more serious than the comparable concerns of his fellow poets in the Irish literary renaissance. The quality of Yeats's scholarship was, in brief, one of the noteworthy aspects of his development as an artist. Few elements in his family background, and little in his erratic and largely unfocused education, would have led others to expect Yeats to develop into a widely read, judiciously discriminating poet-scholar, yet such he became by 1900. A study that assesses justly what in the 1890's could be known about Irish mythology, and what in fact Yeats knew, is badly needed.

Finally, students of Yeats need more guidance about the worth of the *Autobiographies*. The definitive biography of Yeats has not been written. When Yeats wrote about his own life, he composed an artistic recreation of, if not an apologia for, an extraordinarily compacted and eventful career. Annotation of anecdote, evaluation of fact and partial truth, and a review of the corroborating or qualifying evidence would help us to see—for example—that Yeats misrepresented the Rhymers for the sake of heightened drama. We do not know how seriously the publication of a judiciously chosen selection from the thousands of pages of extant Yeats manuscripts would modify our willingness to

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accept Yeats's version of personal friendships and estrangements during the 1890's. The failure to edit properly the recently published collections of Yeats's prose writings—*Mythologies* (1959), *Essays and Introductions* (1961), and *Explorations* (1962)—is much regretted by Yeats scholars. The many essays that have been left out of these volumes need reprinting too.<sup>7</sup> They are not only unavailable for most readers who want to see Yeats plain; they are all of interest, and their full value will be appreciated only when they are made accessible.

# Footnotes

## INTRODUCTION

1. Joseph Hone, *W. B. Yeats, 1865-1939* (London, 1962), p. 165. Cited hereafter as Hone.
2. Thomas Parkinson, *W. B. Yeats, Self-Critic: A Study of His Early Verse* (Berkeley, 1951), pp. 46-50.
3. William Butler Yeats, "I Became an Author," III, *The Listener*, Vol. XX (August 4, 1938), 216-217; also, "Reveries over Childhood and Youth," in *Autobiographies* (New York, 1958), pp. 68-69. Cited hereafter as *Autobiographies*.
4. T. S. Eliot, "The Poetry of W. B. Yeats," in *The Permanence of Yeats*, ed. James Hall and Martin Steinmann (New York, 1961), p. 110.
5. Joseph Hone believed that it had never died out among older readers, i.e., those whose literary tastes had been formed during the 1890's or shortly thereafter. Such a view is unduly diffident about the appeal that these poems have for younger readers; popular anthologies tend to favor the poems from Yeats's earlier period.
6. Dorothy M. Richardson, "Yeats and Bloomsbury," *St. Pancras Journal*, Vol. XII (October, 1958), p. 70.
7. Richard Aldington, *A. E. Housman and W. B. Yeats: Two Lectures* (Hurst, Berkshire, 1955), p. 31.

## I: THE PLAYLETS

1. Katharine Tynan, *Twenty-five Years: Reminiscences* (London, 1913), p. 144.
2. Yeats doubted that he ever fulfilled the promise Johnson saw in them. "I Became an Author," *op. cit.*, p. 217.
3. The play has been reprinted in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, eds. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York, 1957). Act II, Scene iii, is reprinted in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889), with a prose synopsis of the preceding scenes.
4. The Enchantress of the Island may have been modeled on Laura Armstrong, the woman with whom Yeats may have fallen in love. It is significant that the Enchantress's subjects regard human beings as barbarous and un-fairy, and piquant that Maud Gonne should have found Naschina less attractive than the Enchantress.
5. Allan Wade, ed., *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London, 1954), p. 88. Cited hereafter as *Letters*.

## II: BECOMING IRISH

1. *Letters*, p. 66.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
3. *Spectator* (August 3, 1889), p. 143.
4. Russell K. Alspach, "Some Sources of Yeats's *The Wanderings of Oisín*," *PMLA*, Vol. LVIII (September, 1943), pp. 849-866. Alspach believes that Yeats used Bryan O'Looney's translation for the Ossianic Society (Dublin, 1859).
5. A. G. Stock, *W. B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought* (Cambridge, England, 1964), p. 21.
6. Yeats, who knew that the poem had more imaginative energy than anything else in the book, told Miss Tynan that it needed an interpreter. "There are three incompatible things which man is always seeking—infinite feeling, infinite battle, infinite repose—hence the three islands," *Letters*, p. 111. He was simply restating what he had told her in the latter part of 1888: "the whole poem is full of symbols." He claimed at that time that he had said several things in the second part to which only he had the key. His readers could enjoy the romance; the symbols were not meant for them. In this century Richard Ellmann has argued for biographical relationships, and sees Sligo, London, and Howth as a key to the meaning of the three islands. *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York, 1948), pp. 51-55. M. I. Seiden's "A Psycho-Analytical Essay on William Butler Yeats," *Accent*, Vol. VI (Spring, 1946), pp. 178-190, has become notorious (see George Brandon Saul's *Prolegomena to the Study of Yeats's Poems* [Philadelphia, 1957], p. 178), but provides a startlingly different interpretation. John Unterecker, in *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* (New York, 1959), p. 50, refuses to speculate: "... what the symbols mean is a lure that can lead us spectacularly astray. What the symbols do is, it seems to me, closer to our purpose." Unterecker's split between content and form is, by his own admission, arbitrary. Other explanations of the symbols have been offered; there is no critical consensus.

## FOOTNOTES

7. "The *Freeman* reviewer is wrong about peahens, they dance throughout the whole of Indian poetry. If I had *Kalidasa* by me I could find many such dancings. . . . The wild peahen dances or all Indian poets lie." *Letters*, p. 109.

8. Yeats wrote to George Russell on February 8, 1889, "Write and tell me what you like best and what worst, and what the other students who get copies think. The people of my own age are in the long run the most important. They are the future." *Ibid.*, p. 111. Still, he valued most the judgments of Morris, Wilde, and Henley.

9. For example, when he belittles "mystical literary folk, and such like," as well as his own "bloodless philosophical chatter." *Ibid.*, p. 116.

10. William Butler Yeats, "Four Years: 1887-1891," in *Autobiographies*, p. 131.

## III: NEWSPAPER CORRESPONDENT

1. *Letters to the New Island*, p. xii.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 79. Hyde, another erratically educated Irishman, studied the ways of the American Indian in Canada; founded the Gaelic League in 1893, and served as its President until 1915; translated Gaelic poems into the influential volume *Love Songs of Connacht* (a collection that, along with Yeats's *The Celtic Twilight*, convinced Lady Gregory that her real profession was literature); and wrote *Casadh an tSúgáin, or, The Twisting of the Rope*, the first Gaelic play to be performed by the Irish Literary Theatre.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 173-174.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 140-141.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

## IV: ANTHOLOGIST

1. Years later, when Yeats was to reminisce (in his essay "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places") about his walking-tour of Ireland at the end of the century in the company of another indefatigable collector of folk-tales, Lady Gregory, he spoke of the episode as an adventure undertaken by a solicitous woman for the sake of his health. It is true, as Elizabeth Coxhead observed in *Lady Gregory, A Literary Portrait* (New York, 1961), p. 47, that Lady Gregory's interest in folklore antedated the summer of 1897 by many years (she had, for example, learned Gaelic within two years after her husband's death in 1890), and that those who interpret this passage to mean that Yeats was taking credit for having introduced her to the Irish Peasantry are over-solemn. But Yeats was saying something else: Lady Gregory's concern for his health, and her belief that the open air might be "salutary," were justified. Yeats *did* enjoy walking among the peasants to talk with them about the fairies, the ghosts, and the enchanted legends of Ireland; such conversations were good for his health as well as for his art.

2. *Autobiographies*, p. 63.

3. Here may be located Yeats's first draft of *The Countess Cathleen*, with the ambiguous note that the story "The Countess Cathleen O'Shea" originally appeared "in a London-Irish newspaper," and that Yeats was "unable to find out the original source."

4. Walter Starkie, Introduction to *The Celtic Twilight and a Selection of Early Poems* (New York, 1962), p. xviii. In later years, Starkie, despite his strenuous life among Spanish gypsies, found much to censure in Yeats's attitude toward Irish peasants. Starkie's emphasis upon "earthiness" in *The Celtic Twilight* is undoubtedly stronger than Yeats would have liked.

5. Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (New York, 1948), p. 30.

6. J. I. M. Stewart, *Eight Modern Writers* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 306-307.

7. Middleton Murry, "Mr. Yeats's Swan Song," in *The Permanence of Yeats*, p. 12.

8. In 1902 Yeats added a curiously suggestive passage about a walk he had taken near Inchy Wood. A sense of dependence on "a great personal Being somewhere far off yet near at hand" swept over him. This, he thought, might be an emotion akin to "the root of Christian mysticism," and he hoped to learn how to cultivate it deliberately. For the 1902 edition he also recorded his vision of a mild-faced girl who might be the beloved of Aengus.

## FOOTNOTES

9. *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 40.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

### V: PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS:

Madame Blavatsky, the Rhymers, and Edwin Ellis

1. T. L. S., May 20, 1965, p. 397.

2. T. R. Henn, *The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (London, 1965), pp. 25-26.

3. The influence of Theosophical doctrine on *A Vision*, a work published more than three decades after Yeats gave up active participation in Theosophical societies, is traced by Morton Irving Seiden in *William Butler Yeats: The Poet as a Mythmaker, 1865-1939* (New York, 1962), pp. 33-40.

4. *Letters*, p. 59.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

7. Mark Longaker, *Ernest Dowson* (Philadelphia, 1945), p. 89.

8. *Letters*, p. 548.

9. Yeats regretted that France was a land in which "schools, movements and circles" enabled writers to talk with one another, while England, "the land of literary Ishmaels," was a place in which each man worked "by himself and for himself. . . ." He hastened to add that the Rhymers' Club was not a school of poets in the French sense. *Letters to the New Island*, p. 143.

10. *Letters*, p. 548.

11. Longaker (p. 106) insists that most of the members of the Rhymers' Club were "hardly the victims of a poetic creed, much less tragic figures."

12. Wade, *A Bibliography of the Writings of W. B. Yeats* (London, 1958), p. 224. Cited hereafter as *Bibliography*.

13. Written in P. S. O'Hegarty's copy, now in the University of Kansas Library.

14. *Bibliography*, p. 224.

15. *Letters*, p. 107.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 560.

18. Written in O'Hegarty's copy.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (London, 1964), p. 29.

21. Margaret Rudd, *Divided Image: A Study of William Blake and W. B. Yeats* (London, 1953), p. 229.

22. Hone, p. 75.

### VI: IRISH SUBJECT-MATTER

1. In his essay on George Daniel Peter Allt, printed in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, eds. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York, 1957), p. xiii. Cited hereafter as *Variorum Poems*.

2. *Variorum Poems*, p. 844.

3. *Letters*, pp. 206-207.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

6. Writing to Robert Bridges in July, 1901, Yeats gave permission to Mrs. Waterhouse (Bridges' mother-in-law) to reprint the poem, but added that he had become "not a little jealous" of it for having put the noses of all his other children out of joint. *Letters*, p. 353. Yeats's irritation at the success of what was probably his most popular single lyric, was, of course, related to his developing determination to think of the entire Celtic Twilight as an apprenticeship.

7. *Variorum Poems*, p. 811.

8. Barbara Seward, *The Symbolic Rose* (New York, 1960), p. 94.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

10. John Frederick Nims, "Yeats and the Careless Muse," in *Learners and Discerners*, ed. Robert Scholes (Charlottesville, Va., 1964), p. 40.

11. Richard J. Loftus, *Nationalism in Modern Anglo-Irish Poetry* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1964), p. 23. Chapter 2, "The Irish Heritage," pp. 21-37, identifies the elements of the past

## FOOTNOTES

stressed by Irish writers, often at the expense of historical accuracy. Yeats's vagueness about the reliability of his sources was matched only by his vagueness about which sources he used. He admitted he had encountered difficulties in a letter written (probably) to M. Henry D. Davray about the notes he had attached to the poems printed in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899): "The notes are really elaborate essays in the manner of *The Celtic Twilight*. They deal with Irish fairy lore and mythology, and are in most cases made out of quite new material. They have given me a good deal of trouble, and will probably make most of the critics spend half of every review complaining that I have written very long notes about very short poems." (Wade, *Bibliography*, p. 46.) But the notes were not always helpful. In a note on "The Valley of the Black Pig," Yeats quoted Professor Rhys's interpretation of the bristleless boar as a symbol of darkness and cold, rather than of winter and cold, and added, "It may have had different meanings, just as the scourging of the man-god has had different though not contradictory meanings in different epochs of the world." Annotating two poems, "A Cradle Song" and "Michael Robartes Asks Forgiveness Because of his Many Moods," Yeats wrote, "I use the wind as a symbol of vague desires and hopes, not merely because the Sidhe are in the wind, or because the wind bloweth as it listeth, but because wind and spirit and vague desire have been associated everywhere." Yeats's explanation of the rose symbol concluded with a confession: "I have read somewhere that a stone engraved with a Celtic god, who holds what looks like a rose in one hand, has been found somewhere in England; but I cannot find the reference, though I certainly made a note of it. . . ." His note on "Michael Robartes Bids his Beloved be at Peace" read as follows: "Some neo-platonist, I forget who, describes the sea as a symbol of the drifting indefinite bitterness of life, and I believe there is like symbolism intended in the many Irish voyages to the islands of enchantment, or that there was, at any rate, in the mythology out of which these stories have been shaped."

12. In a paper entitled "Early Irish History and Pseudo-History," read at the inaugural meeting of the American Committee for Irish Studies, at the convention of the Modern Language Association, Chicago, December 27, 1961.

13. *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Claude Collier Abbott (Oxford, 1956), pp. 373-374. Hopkins and Yeats met on more than one occasion; see Yeats's introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935* (Oxford, 1960), p. v. For as sensible and full an analysis of what makes the poem "unworkable" as the poem requires, see Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, pp. 48-50. "The Two Titans" was Yeats's first Irish poem.

14. First printed in *The National Observer*, May 21, 1892.

15. First printed in *United Ireland*, June 11, 1892.

16. *Letters*, p. 104.

17. D. M. Hoare, *The Works of Morris and of Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature* (Cambridge, England, 1937), p. 116.

18. *Variorum Poems*, p. 799.

19. *On Baile's Strand*, the middle play of Yeats's Cuchulain quintet, followed the legend more faithfully by identifying the wife as Aoife.

20. "The enormous tension of endlessly balancing flux and permanence, motion and stillness, of retrieving the echo and directing it back to the centre—all this was exhausting and risky business, and no one was more responsibly aware of these risks in the balancing of opposites than was Yeats." Edward Engelberg, *The Vast Design: Patterns in W. B. Yeats's Aesthetic* (Toronto, 1964), p. 30.

21. Wade, *Bibliography*, p. 22.

## VII: A WORLD OF LARGER CONCERNS: AE, ARTHUR SYMONS, AND MAUD GONNE

1. *Letters*, p. 175.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 231-232.

3. Hone, p. 43.

4. *Letters*, pp. 299-300.

5. Wade, *Bibliography*, p. 268.

6. *Literary Ideals in Ireland*, by John Eglinton, W. B. Yeats, AE, and W. Larminie (London and Dublin, 1899).

7. Hone, p. 72.

8. Symons added essays on Balzac, Prosper Mérimée, Théophile Gautier, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, Léon Cladel, and Zola to his revised edition of 1919.



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9. Richard Ellmann, in a preface to a recent paperback edition (New York, 1958), p. xiii, notes the looseness of the terms "appearance" and "reality" as used by Symons.

10. See, for example, C. M. Bowra's *The Heritage of Symbolism* (London, 1943), William York Tindall's *The Literary Symbol* (New York, 1955), and Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image* (London, 1957), *passim*.

11. The other quotation, from Ovid, was discovered by Yeats in one of Leonardo da Vinci's note-books.

12. So Yeats interpreted the moral of *Axël*, in a review printed in the *London Bookman*, April, 1894, and in large part reprinted as the preface to an edition of H. P. R. Finberg's translation of *Axël* (London, 1925).

13. Elizabeth Coxhead, *Daughters of Erin: Five Women of the Irish Renaissance* (London, 1965), p. 76.

14. *Letters*, p. 295.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 313.

## VIII: DRAMATIST

1. *Letters*, p. 284.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 288. George Moore, in *Ave* (London, 1947), p. 264, wrote with the kind of malice that one deplores (even while delighting to quote it), "If Yeats had not begun *The Shadowy Waters* at Coole he had at least written several versions of it under Lady Gregory's roof-tree; and so Coole will be historic; later still, it will become a legend, a sort of Minstrelburg, the home of the Bell Branch Singers. . . ."

3. *Ibid.*, p. 305. The scheme of collaboration proposed in this letter of December 22, 1898, calls for Yeats to do "the actual shaping and writing—apart from peasant talk," but Lady Gregory finally had to do both.

4. The essay, dated March, 1902, is reprinted in *Explorations*, selected by Mrs. W. B. Yeats (London, 1962), pp. 3-13.

5. Elizabeth Coxhead, *Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait* (London, 1961), p. 46.

6. Florence Farr had rented the Avenue Theatre, Northumberland Avenue, London, for the season, and Yeats's one-acter served as a curtain-raiser for Todhunter's *A Comedy of Sighs*; later for George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*. Altogether, it ran for some six weeks of continuous performance. Yeats, writing to John O'Leary about the substitution of Shaw for Todhunter, said with some complacency, "My little play . . . is however considered a fair success. . . ." *Letters*, p. 231.

7. *Letters to the New Island*, pp. 173-174.

8. P. 7. The volume was an unexpectedly successful title in the Cameo Series.

9. *Letters*, p. 280.

10. Yeats's statement as printed on the theatre program for the Irish Literary Theatre, 1899, announcing the first productions of *The Countess Cathleen* and *The Heather Field* in the Antient Concert Rooms "by a Specially-Selected Company of Professional Artistes / Under the General Management of / Miss Florence Farr."

11. *Letters*, p. 309.

12. *Irish Literary Society Gazette*, Vol. I (June, 1899), p. 7.

13. F. H. O'Donnell, *The Stage Irishman of the Pseudo-Celtic Drama* (Dublin, 1904), as quoted in George Brandon Saul's *Prolegomena to the Study of Yeats's Plays* (Philadelphia, 1958), p. 31.

14. Seiden, *William Butler Yeats: The Poet as a Mythmaker, 1865-1939*, p. 214.

15. Eric Bentley, "Yeats as a Playwright," in *The Permanence of Yeats*, p. 214.

16. *Letters*, p. 236. The letter is dated November 5th [1894].

17. See B. B. Bushrui's *Yeats's Verse Plays: The Revisions 1900-1910* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 1-4, for a lucid review of a complicated history of texts.

18. David Clark, "Half the Characters Had Eagles' Faces: W. B. Yeats' Unpublished *Shadowy Waters*," *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. VI (Autumn-Winter, 1964-65), p. 156.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

20. Lady Gregory was taken aback by Yeats's description of the Fomorians as having "eagles' faces." *Our Irish Theatre* (London, 1913), p. 3.

21. *Letters*, p. 114. Yeats was writing to Katharine Tynan.

22. Peter Ure, *Yeats the Playwright* (London, 1963), pp. 12-13.

23. Andrew E. Malone, *The Irish Drama* (London, 1929), p. 131.

24. H. E. Krans, *William Butler Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival* (London, 1915), p. 141.

## FOOTNOTES

25. Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York, 1948), p. 183.

26. The Countess Cathleen's repudiation of the dream-world is obviously the "counter-truth" to which Yeats referred in "The Circus Animals' Desertion," an important retrospective poem written toward the end of his life, and was meant to balance Oisín's rejection of St. Patrick. Ure, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-18, notes that Yeats was talking about Maud Gonne's character in this poem:

She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away,  
But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it.  
I thought my dear must her own soul destroy,  
So did fanaticism and hate enslave it. . . .

It is certainly not an accurate description of the motivation of the Countess Cathleen for selling her soul in any of the versions of the play.

27. For a detailed study of the ways in which Yeats revised this play, and the improvements which such revisions provided, see David R. Clark, "Vision and Revision: Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*," in *The World of W. B. Yeats: Essays in Perspective*, edited by Robin Skelton and Ann Saddlemyer (Dublin, 1965), pp. 158-176. The chart which Ure supplies (*op. cit.*, pp. 14-15) is, as he admits, "a convenient, if graceless, way of providing a basis for considering how much, and how little, the alterations affected the story, shape, and construction of the play."

## IX: THE WIND AMONG THE REEDS

1. Wade, *Bibliography*, p. 46.

2. Hone, p. 166: ". . . it is significant that of all his books this was the one which he revised least for republication. These lyrics must be pre-Raphaelite or nothing."

3. Stephen Dedalus, declaring his independence from the Celtic Twilight movement that he distrusted, wanted to embrace the loveliness that had not yet come into the world. Nevertheless, for all his insistence on the loneliness of an artist's development, James Joyce studied Yeats's poetry of the 1890's with great respect, and much of *Chamber Music* is patterned after *The Wind Among the Reeds*: see particularly "I hear an army charging upon the land," which echoes the opening lines of "Michael Robartes Bids His Beloved Be at Peace": "I hear the Shadowy Horses, their long manes ashake,/ Their hoofs heavy with tumult, their eyes glimmering white. . . ."

4. David Daiches believes that this change "is an important clue to the function of Yeats's symbolic systems, indicating that they were intended to help himself more than the reader, so that once he had completed the poem the framework could later be removed without loss." "W. B. Yeats—I," in *The Permanence of Yeats*, p. 120.

5. F. A. C. Wilson, *W. B. Yeats and Tradition* (New York, 1958), p. 29.

6. Jon Stallworthy, *Between the Lines: W. B. Yeats's Poetry in the Making* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 8-9.

7. *The Critic*, Vol. XXXV, o.s. (September, 1899), p. 850.

8. The original review of *The Wind Among the Reeds* appeared in *The Academy*, Vol. 56 (May 6, 1899), pp. 501-502; the announcement of the award was apparently written by the same reviewer for the issue of January 20, 1900, p. 63.

9. Stephen Maxfield Parrish, *A Concordance to the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Ithaca, New York, 1963).

## X: CONCLUSION

1. This matter has occupied an important part of Yeats scholarship since World War II: e.g., Balachandra Rajan, in *W. B. Yeats, A Critical Introduction* (London, 1965), p. 31, makes some sensible observations on the debate between Louis MacNeice, Richard Ellmann, and Jon Stallworthy on the merits of Yeats's revisions of "The Sorrow of Love."

2. Joseph Warren Beach, *The Making of the Auden Canon* (Minneapolis, 1957), p. 248.

3. See, for example, K. G. W. Cross's "The Fascination of What's Difficult: A Survey of Yeats Criticism and Research," in *In Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute to William Butler Yeats, 1865-1939*, edited by A. Norman Jeffares and K. G. W. Cross (London, 1965), pp. 331-334; and Marion Witt, "Yeats: 1865-1965," *PMLA*, Vol. LXXX (September, 1965), pp. 311-320.

4. *Letters*, p. 280.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

7. Richard M. Kain, "The Status of Yeats Scholarship," *Éire-Ireland*, Vol. II (Autumn, 1967), pp. 108-110.

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